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BLACK SAM, THE PRAIRIE THUNDERBOLT; or, The Bandit-Hunters.

A TALE OF THE SOUTHWEST FRONTIER.

BY COL. JO YARDS—"Virginia Jo."



THE NOBLE HORSE, NERVED WITH TERROR, MAKES TREMENDOUS LEAPS. BLACK SAM HOLDS ON WITH AWFUL DESPERATION.

Black Sam,

The Prairie Thunderbolt;

OR,

THE BANDIT-HUNTERS.

A Tale of the Southwest Frontier.

BY COLONEL JO YARDS,
(VIRGINIA JO).

CHAPTER I.

A DANGEROUS ERRAND.

THE men at Fort B—were in a state of great excitement, to say the least of it.

The negro scout, Sam, had arrived late in the night, or rather, early in the morning, from a trip up the Rio Grande. Now, before any one could obtain a word with him, he was closeted in close consultation with the officer in command, Colonel Harrison.

To add to the wonder of the soldiers as to what important affair could be in the wind, Lieutenant Richard Moore, the youngest, as well as the coolest and bravest officer in the fort, next to his superior, Colonel Harrison, had been summoned to take part in the consultation.

They could only await the outcome of all this mystery in anxious expectation.

Just here we may say that Fort B—is one of the many posts dotted along the frontier of the United States, and among which our little army of 25 000 is distributed for keeping down disorderly Indians and outlaws. This particular post is situated not far from the Rio Grande, on a sort of knoll, commanding a wide view of the broad, fertile prairie-lands of Southwestern Texas. This is the Paradise of stock and ranchmen, and cattle by the ten thousand roam over the vast meadows.

This also is the harvest-ground of lawless cattle-raiders from across the border, who, with their savage hordes of Apaches or Gringos sweep down upon the defenseless herders, and render them destitute in a single night.

On this morning the sun arose in all its splendor. It was early autumn. Not a cloud floated in the bright blue of the sky, and the warm rays as they peeped over into the rude frontier fort, cast a sort of golden splendor over the long rows of barracks—low, homely affairs of log and turf, and lingered with a loving radiance about the two-story house in the center, that served as head-quarters to the officer in command.

An important scene was taking place in the best room—used promiscuously as parlor or office—of the colonel's house. The colonel, a middle-aged man, his dark hair already turning gray, and of tall, commanding presence, was seated before a high-topped desk at one side of the room, fingering some papers, with which and with various War Department documents, the desk was littered.

At either end of the desk stood the two men whose summons into the colonel's sanctum so early in the morning had excited the curiosity of the soldiers—one, fair, pale—the other a coal-black.

Lieutenant Moore was a West Point graduate of two years' standing. His native State was South Carolina. He possessed to the full the chivalry and courage of the higher class of Southern gentlemen. He was well skilled in every manly accomplishment. These advantages were set off by a tall, manly form, pale, clear-cut features, framed by dark, curling hair, to which a well-trimmed mustache added an aristocratic air.

The scout, Sam, was a tall, stout negro, who was now leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his brawny breast, the huge muscles swelling through his red flannel shirt—the lower limbs, cased in cowhide boots and blue cotton pants, were planted heavy and solid as iron columns.

He was a very Hercules in strength, and one of the best scouts on the frontier.

He had been speaking as Lieutenant Moore entered, but was now a silent listener to the other two.

"Lieutenant Moore," said the colonel, "I believe you asked to be sent out as scout in the next important affair. The affair has now come. Are you still anxious for the duty?"

The young lieutenant's eyes flashed.

"Whatever it be," he answered, eagerly, "you could not have hit my wish more exactly. I'm sick of the dull stagnation here at the fort."

"Not so fast," and the colonel smiled at the young soldier's enthusiasm. "We all know your bravery, and you shall have opportunity to show it—perhaps more than you wish for. But there are other requisites. The enemy you are to be pitted against is craftier than the fox, wiler than a Sioux Indian, and has more doubles and twists than a hare chased by the hounds."

"Who is the enemy?"

"Hernan Balboaz, the most notorious bandit and cattle-stealer on the Mexican border."

"Where is he? What has he done?"

The young man's tone was eager, as if he would there and then have throttled the said Hernan were he in fact reach.

"Sam here must tell you the particulars. He has just returned from a three days' trip up the river. Sam, where did you first learn that this Balboaz crossed the river?"

"'Bout fifty miles up near de river Pecos."

"How did you find out?"

"Oh, dere am half a dozen ranchers up dere—just wild. De cattle 'n' hosses all dribben off; a coupley barns burnt; one man shot down—'n' de debbil to pay all round."

"What sort of a gang has he—how many?"

"Nearly a hundred—'Paches 'n' murderin' half-breeds, 'n' Greasers."

"When did this happen?"

"Night afore last. I rode all last night to bring de news."

"You have done well. Can you guess where this Balboaz is now? Is there any chance of catching him?"

"Dunno," said the negro, scratching his woolly head; "dat am hard to tell. He's here, thar, 'n' everywhar—dartin' about like a bumble-bee, or a will-o'-the-wisp. No tellin' whar he be now."

"Do you think you could find him—trail him down?"

The colonel asked this question with more than usual earnestness. He turned his eyes fully upon Sam's ebony features.

"Dat am anudder hard question. I'm good at follerin' a hoss-trail if 'twere across a wooden floor. I could trail him clean to Jerrygo fur that matta, but what am de good ob it when you neber catch up wid him?"

At this the two listeners laughed.

"You must use stratagem, Sam, stratagem. That's the whole art of war," said the colonel.

"Dar you go wid yer big words," responded Sam. "I neber sot up to hab de senses ob a white man; I see only a niggah, I is—wid no edication to brag on. Gib me a clean trail 'n' a far up 'n' down fight 'n' I kin buck ag'inst any three men dat were eber born. But don't bodder me wid stratty gins, kurnel. When it comes to de snake-in-de grass kind o' work, I see nowhar."

"How would you like Lieutenant Moore here as a partner? He will do the snake-in-the-grass part, laughed the colonel."

"De berry ting," answered Sam, eagerly.

"Do may de old Satan ketch me if I'd eber call de lieutenant a snake-in-de-grass. It's not in him—dat's whar Balboaz is!"

"Thank you for the compliment. I hope I shall always mind it," said the lieutenant, smiling.

"But—but," stammered Sam, "maybe de gentleman will not like the company of a—"

"Nonsense, Sam!" broke in Richard Moore; "if you have a black skin your heart's as sound and true as any white man's between this and the Atlantic, besides having the muscle of half a dozen ordinary men."

If Sam could have blushed he would undoubtedly have done so on receiving this hearty praise.

"So it's settled," resumed the colonel more gravely. "I shall send you two as scouts on the trail of this Hernan Balboaz. Find out where he is—if possible, learn where he will recross the river, and when. I shall have a force conveniently near for setting an ambush, and, if possible will surprise the bandit and his followers while burdened with the stolen cattle. You both know with whom you have to deal. Caution and cunning are needed and not rash bravery. Report within two days at the earliest. I shall march, with a part of the garrison, to Spring Bluff. And now we have already spent some valuable time and it behooves you to be off on the instant. Get the best mount in the fort."

The colonel rose as he concluded. The other two regarded the interview as at an end; and both saluting, retired from the room and the house, taking the direction of the stables.

In less than half an hour, both men, splendidly mounted, and thoroughly equipped for a long scout, galloped out of the northern entrance of Fort B—out upon the broad and meadow-like prairie, toward the northwest.

CHAPTER II.

THE CATTLE RAIDERS.

A WIDE and boundless plain—boundless to the eye of man—a plain clothed to the furthest limit of the vision in a garment of tall mesquite grass, with flowers of every varied hue, making in the joyous springtime one living mass of green and blossoming verdure, now all parched and withering under the burning autumn sun.

At remote intervals groves of the tall pecan tree may be found, or a small round knoll, to relieve the monotonous dead level. Now and then small streams cut through the deep prairie soil, diffusing fresh life and verdure along its banks, and meandering away to mingle its waters with the waves of the Rio Grande.

Over this same plain, late in the evening on

the day on which our story opens, two men—a negro and a white man—mounted and armed in true frontier style, were riding at a rapid pace in the direction of the Pecos river.

They rode in a swift gallop. Each man's head was bent over his horse's mane; each man's eyes swept the trampled grass before him with keen and eager gaze.

The two riders are the young soldier, Richard Moore, and the colored scout Sam, on the trail of the daring bandit Hernan Balboaz.

Lieutenant Moore has just halted for perhaps the third time in the course of an hour. Through a costly field-glass, carried by a loop to his belt, he surveys long and earnestly the vast level of prairie grass before them.

Sam reined in his horse also; a powerful, dark-gray horse of the mustang breed, one of the largest of his kind, and fully equal to the huge weight he bore.

"Am dere any signs ob de Greasers yet?" he asked.

"Not a trace to be seen. It's my opinion we are on a cold trail, and the fellows are miles off our course."

"I can settle dat matter in de shake ob dis boss's tail. Just hold him a minit, Mars' Moore," so saying the negro flung his bridle to his companion and dismounted.

He cast himself on his knees, and scrutinized with his keen black eyes the trampled grass and tracks of horses' hoofs imprinted in the soft mold. He even examined the broken blades of dry grass, and bent his huge round head to smell of the crushed soil.

Each grain of dust, each trampled leaf, spoke to him from the vast volume of nature like the words of a printed book.

"Jerusalem! you're right, Mars' Moore!" he exclaimed, jumping up. "Dese hyar tracks am a day old. Dat Mexican rogue may be fifty miles off fur all dis darky knows. We am in a bad fix, shoah."

While Sam had been making his observations on the trail before him, Richard Moore had continued his outlook through the glass. He swept the whole horizon, north, south, east and west, now flushed up to a golden red by the setting sun.

As the negro finished speaking, a startled exclamation broke from the young soldier's lips.

"What am it, Mars' Moore?" inquired Sam, looking up.

Moore did not reply for a full minute, which was occupied in a careful view of the point which had so suddenly arrested his attention.

Then his arm slowly dropped to his side as he grasped more firmly the long tube of the field-glass, and he spoke in calm tones that only added emphasis to his remark:

"If I am not mistaken, Sam, our game is closer than we thought. Take a look yourself, and let me know what you think of it."

With the words he handed the glass to Sam, who had meantime remounted his horse.

The direction pointed out was almost directly east. The reflection from the sun's rays on the blue horizon brought out every object with startling distinctness.

And this is what the negro scout beheld miles away upon the level prairie.

First, a vast cloud of dust rising aloft in the clear atmosphere and spreading widely on either side. Then, as a strong breeze from the west now and then lifted the cloud, the countless heads of a vast herd of cattle; here and there the nobler heads of horses with their flowing manes rising up, were seen as in a moving picture, instantly to be again hidden behind the cloud of dust. To Sam they seemed to be driven rapidly and were headed directly toward our two companions.

"Hernan wid de stolen cattle!—I'd swar to He'ben!" was Sam's exclamation as he returned the glass to the lieutenant.

A few moments of silence followed, both sitting still as statues on their motionless steeds, whose heads like their masters' eyes were turned eastward.

Gradually, the cloud of dust became visible to the naked eye. Now and then a glimpse of a dark mass behind it greeted their gaze.

"This won't do," at length observed Lieutenant Moore. "We are directly in their path and unless we wish to be run over it behooves us to seek safer quarters."

"Sides which they might 'appen to catch sight ob us, which wouldn't suit dis darky's plans by a long sight."

"Not apt to when the cattle are between us," observed the soldier.

Now in this the young officer was greatly mistaken.

An outrider of the band of raiders rode a good dozen rods in advance of the stolen herd. He kept as keen a lookout as our two friends themselves.

The latter now turned their horses' heads to the north riding at a pace that in a few minutes would outflank the advancing herd.

In the course of this movement they unconsciously allowed the latter to approach within plain view—so plain that the long, white horns of the Texan steers glittered under the last golden rays of the setting sun and the thunder

of their hoofs on the parched plain became audible.

At as swift a pace as possible they urged their horses onward and away till the foam flecked their lips and their tawny coats became wet with sweat.

As they galloped onward they slackened their pace without looking round. Their horses' feet beat less loudly on the parched soil. Then came an ominous sound.

The sound of hoof-beats coming rapidly from the rear.

With a common impulse both men turned in their saddles.

A troop of light horsemen headed by a slender form on a steed white as snow was approaching them at full speed. Their shouts already plainly heard, the glitter of their arms already visible over the waving sea of grass.

CHAPTER III.

FIRE!

"HEBUN! dey hab spotted us, shoah!" was the exclamation that fell from the negro scout's lips as his glance fell upon the rapidly nearing forms of their pursuers.

As for Richard Moore his firm gray eyes glowed with the excitement of the moment. Otherwise not a tremor betrayed him from his usual calm exterior.

"Let them come," he said. "They may chase us but they have not yet caught us. Now is the time to try our horses' mettle, Sam. Up and away!"

Then with one slender hand he shook the reins on his courser's neck. Like an arrow from the bow the splendid thoroughbred darted forward and away over the broad level.

Sam's powerful mustang followed with mighty leaps through the tall grass though soon his labored panting showed what an effort it required.

"Halt!"

The cry came faintly borne to their ears from the rear mingled with shouts and curses in two or three different tongues. A loud, taunting laugh was echoed back by the young lieutenant.

It was a grand burst of speed—that first effort of the straining horses and carried our friends almost in an instant out of hearing of the cries of their pursuers. But the noble steeds, already fagged by a day's travel, could hold such a tremendous pace but a short time.

First Sam's horse burdened as he was showed signs of giving out. In mercy to the struggling beasts they were compelled to slacken down to a more moderate gallop.

The distance between the parties now remained for some time the same, neither increased nor diminished.

Meanwhile the sun had set and with a rapidity peculiar to Southern latitudes darkness settled down over the broad prairie, shutting out from view of either party the forms of their enemies. Gradually the stars peeped forth and the crescent moon, a silver-white disk, beamed down with mystic light from the dark-blue vault. Only the sounds of the rapid hoof-beats were heard with strange, almost startling distinctness through the silent air.

On they sped, like swift-gliding shadows under the spectral light of the moon—with nerves tense and lips compressed—their heads bowed to the breeze that now blew strongly from the west.

There is a sudden cry from the lieutenant who rides slightly in advance. With the cry he pulls the reins before lying loosely on his courser's neck till he rears again. Directly in front is dimly seen a dark glittering mirror that ripples along between shallow banks.

Within this liquid mirror shone fathoms deep the myriad stars, and the pale crescent moon, forming a second firmament in the shadowy depths.

To a stranger a plunge into these calm, clear waters would seem like taking a last farewell of earth and its vanities.

It was Sam who broke the silence created by this seemingly fatal discovery.

He reined in his horse alongside his companion's and took one look at the stream and its grass-covered banks.

"Pshaw!" he cried as he noted Moore's hesitation. "Dis am only a branch ob de Paycos. It am shallower 'n' a dish-pan dis time o' year. Jes' watch me."

And with the words he gave his horse the spur. The well-trained horse leaped with the touch of the iron rowels out into the mirror-like stream. Moore expected at least that he would sink to the saddle-rim.

To his surprise the steed landed as if on solid ground. The water did not reach his knees.

The soldier gave a loud laugh and without further delay urged his mare into the stream. Together they reached the opposite side without difficulty.

"What a sell that was!" laughed Moore as he reined up on the bank beside Sam. "I thought the stream at least beyond a horse's depth."

"So enny one 'ud think," replied Sam, "who had no acquaintanceship wid de natur' ob de kentry. Yer see all dese prairie ribers am bery

shallow, 'specially in de hot season. I s'pose bekase de kintry am so lebel."

With which very lucid explanation Sam turned in his saddle to take a look at their enemies.

The view that greeted his backward glance dispelled all thoughts of the stream they had forded.

The short pause on the opposite side, brief as it was, had served to bring the pursuers dangerously near.

The latter were only within a dozen rods of the stream itself. Their voices were plainly heard and the dark forms of men and steeds began to loom forth in the dim moonlight.

Our two friends urged on their horses anew. A long chase seemed now to threaten them.

The wearied steeds responded nobly to this fresh demand upon their strength. Too evidently the effort was exhausting. Their struggling breath began to come in fierce pants; their flagging limbs could scarce make the swift gallop.

"This cannot last long," cried the lieutenant. "We shall have to make a fight of it, for surrender to that Mexican thief—never!"

The words, shouted fiercely, rose above the sounds made by the galloping steeds. The negro re-echoed the daring speech.

"Neber! Jes' gib dis darky a chance at dem cussed Greasers. Hi'll scatter wuss confushun dan a dozen wildcats. If you'se mean fight, Mars' Moore, hyer am yer right bower."

"No doubt of it, Sam. But it's big odds even with your Samson-like strength and courage."

"How many shots hab we atween us?"

"Two long-range Winchesters—sixteen-shooters; a brace of revolvers apiece. There are plenty to clean 'em out, Sam, provided they stand still and let us shoot at them."

"Haw! haw!" laughed Sam, "not apt to. More'n likely dey're heeled as good as we."

"While there's life, there's hope. Our horses may stand it another half-hour and who knows what may turn up?"

Who indeed!

On they galloped.

But a strange stillness began to reign in the air. The breeze from the west had fallen. The atmosphere felt dry and rarefied, and even the two riders began to breathe with less ease.

"Isn't there something peculiar about the air, Sam?" inquired Moore, drawing a long breath.

"Yessah, I'se noticed it fur de las' ten minutes," answered the negro in an anxious tone.

"Ope to heben it mayn't be what it seems!"

"Why, what is that, Sam?"

Sam was on the point of replying when at that instant they rose a slight ridge in the prairie whence they could see far off through the darkness.

The young soldier needed no further answer to his question.

Far off along the horizon spreading north and south in a seemingly endless span, ran a long line of flame, glowing, sparkling, leaping with tremendous speed over the withered prairie. No sound was yet heard, no smoke was visible through the darkness. Only that endless crescent of glowing red flame, sweeping onward swift as a race-horse, noiseless as death—glittering, terrible, sublime—like the sword of the destroying angel.

Only one word broke from the spell-bound pair. That word came from the negro, Sam—re-echoed thrice in a tone thrilled with despair: "Lost! Lost! Lost!"

CHAPTER IV.

A RACE WITH DEATH.

It was an awful, yet sublime moment.

There on the rounded summit of that slight ridge stood the two scouts seemingly doomed to a terrible death. Before them—swift-nearing flames; behind them—a merciless foe. Which should they choose?

The two friends were stirred by quite different feelings.

A strange terror possessed the negro, Sam, whom mere human power could never have daunted; but whose superstitious soul trembled before the mysterious forces of nature.

On the other hand Richard Moore, as he sat on his coal-black mare, his manly brow bared to the hot, dry breeze, felt thrilled with a sense not of fear, but of intense awe and grandeur mingled with a certain fierce joy. He forgot the fire in his rear—he forgot the peril, even now vast and threatening, sweeping down on him from the west. He forgot all in that first glance at the lurid crescent of flame and the grandeur of its swift yet noiseless approach.

He recalled his old cadet days and the countless histories he had read of Napoleon and the burning of Moscow. Yet now he realized for the first time what must have been the emotions of the great emperor, gazing upon the burning capital of all the Russias and exclaiming: "This is the most sublime spectacle the world ever saw."

"Is it not grand?" he cried to the trembling negro, waving his hand toward the fiery crescent. "I would willingly be chased another score of miles if such a scene was at the end of it."

"Oh, Mars' Moore!" returned Sam in beseeching tones; "you'se be triflin' wid Fate. We'll all be burnt—shoah's yer libin'—burnt, roasted, scorched to a crisp—hosses 'n' all. Hebens! Only look how it rises and leaps! an' dar—did you b'ar dat roarin'? Oh, good Lord! we am lost—lost!"

In fact, the prairie fire, at first many miles away and only rendered visible by the darkness, was now getting dangerously near. The dry, withered grass was licked up by the glowing flames like oil. A faint, roaring sound like the first rumblings of an earthquake became audible to the two scouts. Half the stars were blotted out by a thick, black pall of smoke.

"Strange I hear nothing of our pursuers," now remarked the lieutenant, bending his head to one side in a listening attitude. "We have halted long enough for them to be on us."

"Dey am gone, shoah," declared Sam, looking back over the dark prairie they had traversed.

What a contrast it was to the awful splendor before them!

As far as his gaze could pierce the gloom Sam's remark was true. Not a trace of the enemy could be seen.

"Ha! I have it!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "They have scented the fire before us and have sought for safe quarters. But where can they have gone?"

"De riber! de riber!" cried Sam, tossing his arms in his excitement. "I hab it, Mars' Moore—dey am in de riber. De riber will save us. Back like a streak o' lightning, Mars' Moore, if you value a cool skin."

And Sam turned his horse's head for flight.

It took the lieutenant but an instant to realize the sense of Sam's proposal. The river was wide and would undoubtedly save them from a horrible death.

But could they reach it in time?

In their flight from the cattle-raiders they had put some two miles between the river and their present stand-point.

Even should they succeed in outrunning the flames, would they not be running right into the hands of the raiders?

These thoughts flashed through Moore's mind in a second. His choice was instantly made.

"Away!" the young officer shouted to Sam; "Balboaz will be more merciful than those flames."

Again the mad gallop—the fierce struggling of the horses through the tangled grass.

The pursuing flames vanish for an instant behind the slight ridge. But the roaring becomes louder and more terrible like that of a hurricane sweeping over the foaming waves of the sea.

On and on, as if chased by demon-ghosts gallop the two scouts. On and on! a mile is passed.

And lo, the vast crescent of devouring flame has swept over the ridge, only a mile off. Can they reach the river?

Another half mile. Our friends press on their wearied steeds with shout and spur. With lips tense and hands clinching the reins like iron, they look not to the rear. Still the terrific roaring beyond all description sounds in their ears. Puffs of smoke sweep by and half stifle them.

Hurrah! the river is in sight and yet untouched. One more burst of speed—another struggle—and they are safe.

But no! Sam's horse, though the sharp spur causes the blood to flow—can go no further. A last fierce bound! his legs totter under him. He falls. A horrible gasping noise comes from the open mouth and with it a stream of blood.

Sam leaped from the over-wrought steed in time to avoid being crushed. As he touched the ground he cried:

"Away! away, Mars' Moore! Stop an instant an' you am lost."

"And leave you, Sam?" cried the lieutenant. "What do you take me for? My horse, though, is nearly winded, and cannot bear a double burden. But—can you run?"

"Like goose wid 'm wings cut. I'se too stout for to run much."

"Then you must run now if you never ran before. Quick! Catch hold of my saddle loop and away! It is life or death now, Sam!"

Black Sam obeyed at the word. The terror of the moment lent his limbs an unwonted agility. His terrific bounds through the long grass would have astonished an acrobat. Even the lieutenant smiled notwithstanding the awful crisis.

And now the last solemn moment nears. The heat becomes greater and greater. The noise is indescribable. The prairie for miles before them is lighted up as in open day. Must they perish there? They dare not look behind. The flames are almost upon them. Death rides at their side! The noble horse, nerved with terror, makes tremendous leaps. Black Sam holds on with awful desperation.

Thank Heaven!

With a bound horse, rider and Black Sam are upon the water-course's green bank. Another and all are in the river—saved!

Oh, how grateful those cooling waters to the exhausted scouts, the panting steed!

Then, before they could even turn, a hot blast of air as from a furnace swept over their heads carrying a shower of sparks and burning grass which scorched the backs of the two riders and their steed but was otherwise harmless. Some were wafted to the center of the stream, or even to the opposite side, where, dropping on the grass dry as tinder, they kindled a new conflagration to sweep on in its dread career eastward.

The two friends in the river were safe. And now they looked behind.

Instead of the sublime spectacle of a burning prairie, they saw only bare, hard ground, level as a barn-floor, and covered with light, drifting ashes.

Thus gazing in wonderment on the scene so greatly changed, over which they had just struggled for life, a hand was laid lightly on Moore's shoulder, and a mild, girlish voice said:

"Senor, you have had a grand race with death, and have come off the winner. I saw it all; it was magnificent!"

CHAPTER V.

HERNAN BALBOAZ.

RICHARD MOORE turned to survey the speaker.

He beheld, little to his surprise, the form of his foremost pursuer of an hour before, mounted on the same snow-white steed.

Under the dim rays of the moon he beheld a slender yet well-molded form clad in a gaudy Mexican costume—an open coat of velvet, dyed scarlet and glittering with yellow buttons and gold braid; vest and trousers of the same brilliant hue, the latter slashed at the ends and half covering the slender, neatly-booted feet, resting lightly in the silver stirrups. A wide-brimmed sombrero half covered dark, curling hair that fell to the collar of his velvet riding-coat. Underneath this gleamed a face of startling beauty and regularity of outline—of a rich olive tint, perfectly smooth and undimmed by the shadow of a beard. The eyes, varying in color from a dark blue to a black, were of a brilliancy and depth indescribable.

Such was one of those strange beings now and then met with who, like Caesar Borgia, to the most perfect beauty of form and face, unite a soul stained with the blackest crimes.

Moore betrayed no surprise on being thus suddenly accosted by the splendidly-arrayed bandit.

"We have made a narrow escape," he said, "from the fire; but it seems only to fall into perhaps equal danger, if we may judge from your earnest pursuit of us a little while since."

The leader of the pursuers alluded to smiled—a careless, yet meaning smile, and patted his horse's flowing mane.

"We shall settle that on better acquaintance, senor. Meantime, let us introduce ourselves—I am Hernan Balboaz, somewhat celebrated as a dealer and speculator in cattle. Pray, who are you?"

During the interval, short as it was, of this unfortunate encounter, Richard Moore had hit upon a clever ruse for evading the fate seemingly inevitable that threatened him. His brief stay at Fort B—had made him acquainted with a notorious character who went under the name of Texas Jim. By a lucky coincidence, this personage bore a somewhat remarkable personal resemblance to the lieutenant. His character as a noted desperado and rough—bold and unscrupulous, yet wearing on occasion the outward aspect of the gentleman, would render the acquaintance acceptable to a man like Hernan Balboaz.

Furthermore, so far as Richard Moore's knowledge extended, no previous acquaintance existed between the two outlaws.

In the intercourse that follows between Moore and the bandit leader we behold the lieutenant in a new role.

"Hernan Balboaz?" he cried, as if overjoyed. "Do I indeed behold that renowned king of cattle-stealers? Shake, pard! The lions of the border have met at last!"

"But, senor, I know not the name."

"Ha! ha! I have some half-dozen, Hernan. My first was James Robinson—my last you should know well—Jim Reynolds, alias Texas Jim."

The young lieutenant, although he had served no apprenticeship in the actor's art, performed his part to perfection. His dress, a fine hunting-suit of deerskin, and the plentiful display of firearms, served admirably to support the assumed character; yet the keen eyes of the bandit did not relax their searching gaze. He continued, leaving the extended hand unnoticed:

"Why then did you run away so fast when you saw us in chase?"

"A tender conscience gives light heels, cap'n—you should know that. How did I know but that you were a squad of military, or a drove of herders bent on running me down?"

"Would I could put faith in you! But your negro—who made such a famous race with your horse—the fairly-arched lips parted in a smile

at the remembrance. "You have not accounted for him. Who is he? How comes he with you?"

Sam, being on foot, had already crawled out of the water upon the bank—now cooled from the recent fiery tornado that had swept over it. He was a silent but attentive listener to the two men. He had taken in the ruse his comrade was playing and was watching the issue with intense anxiety.

"Do you mean Samson here?" cried the lieutenant in answer to Balboaz's questions. "Why, cap'n, he's the best pard ye ever saw! Can't be beat. Has almost the strength of his famous namesake and can throw any two men in your band. I got him out of a bad scrape at San Antonio, and in return he has rescued me from the sheriff's posse half a dozen times."

"I begin to believe your story, Senor Jim. But there is still a test I must put you through. Pass that and your identity is settled beyond a doubt."

The brave lieutenant's heart sunk within him; still he put a bold face on the matter.

"Seems to me, cap'n, yer darned skeptical all to once. How do I know that you are the real, bona fide Hernan Balboaz? I never saw that girl's face of yours before and my word is about on a level as to veracity with yours."

Again the ironical, meaning smile curved the bandit's lips.

"The circumstances are quite different," he returned. "You are weak; I am strong. Look down the river to where you see a grove on the further side. There are quartered some ninety brave followers, ready to defend me to the death. You are defenseless. True, I seem just at this spot to be alone, and by a combined attack you and your black friend might easily overpower me. However, let me show you how foolish you would be in making the attempt."

He drew a short silver whistle from his bosom, which hung suspended by a cord to his neck, and blew a shrill blast resembling the cry of a night-hawk.

The sound had not died away when out from the gloom that shrouded the banks on either side leaped the eight troopers—the same who had followed their bandit captain in the mad chase across the prairie. They ranged themselves in a semicircle about the lieutenant and his crafty foe.

Moore saw how cunningly he and his comrade had been entrapped. Still he preserved his bold exterior.

"Your precautions are needless," he said a little sarcastically. "I assure you I had not the slightest idea of trying a tilt at arms with you."

"Possibly. Still I make it a point to be always prepared."

"Well, for the test!" cried Moore impatiently. "I am willing to satisfy you in whatever is reasonable."

"Let us adjourn to dry land first," said Balboaz, in high glee. Taking the lead, he made his horse leap to the bank. The rest followed his example, the eight riders keeping respectfully in the rear.

"This is the test," said the bandit, when they had all reined in their horses on the level prairie. "You are reported, Senor Jim, to be the best pistol-shot in all Texas. You acknowledge the truth of this?"

What could the lieutenant answer with those keen eyes reading his face? He guessed what was coming; but to go back on the reputation of the man he was personating—it would never do.

So he answered, without changing countenance:

"I guess, cap'n, wi'out boastin' I am a pretty good hand with the revolver."

"Then," went on Balboaz, with a cruel smile, "as a proof of this you will, with your own revolver, at a distance of twelve paces, pick off the top button of your sable friend's coat. It is of brass, and can be plainly seen in the moonlight. Remember, you are not to injure the darky, or pierce his clothing," and still smiling, the bandit patted once more his charger's snowy neck.

Sam, the object of these remarks, had retained his position near the lieutenant, and so was fully conscious of the very prominent part allotted him in this new version of William Tell.

"Do it, Mars' Jim! Do it," he cried. "Yer knows you has hit a nicer mark many a time. I shall be steady as a post."

"Would you risk your life—and for me?" cried the soldier much moved. "No by heaven, I shall not. Do your worst, Senor Balboaz, but such a risk a partner of mine shall never run, through me."

"Very affecting!" exclaimed Balboaz, sarcastically. "What if I should say that both you and your negro shall be hung as spies unless you undergo the test?"

"You are a heartless fiend, Hernan Balboaz," exclaimed the sorely-tried lieutenant.

His tormentor laughed—a low, sinister laugh.

"Thank you for the compliment," he said. "I shall try to deserve it. Meantime hasten your decision for it is growing late."

CHAPTER VI.

A FEARFUL ORDEAL.

It was an impressive scene—that now going on by the tranquil, moonlit stream on the surface baked hard and bare of the burned prairie.

Prominent were the forms of Richard Moore and the bandit-leader, mounted on their strangely contrasted steeds, one jet-black, the other white as snow.

Behind these two were grouped the eight troopers, silent but interested spectators of this singular transaction.

To one side, but close to the lieutenant on his black mare, stood the negro Sam.

And now Richard Moore to support the character of the desperado Texas Jim was called on to perform a feat which perhaps not one in ten thousand could do successfully. The penalty in case of failure an ignominious death in company with his faithful follower.

His practice with small arms had, it is true, been considerable. In fact, wearied with the monotony of garrison life he had spent a portion of each day shooting at difficult marks, and in skill surpassed all his fellow-officers.

But this feat of shooting by moonlight a button from his comrade's coat at twelve paces, was, to say the least of it, entirely new.

He could only succeed by a lucky chance. The slightest divergence of aim to one side or the other would either cause a miss and its probably fatal consequences, or inflict a wound possibly mortal on his faithful friend Sam.

It was the latter who put an end to his perplexity.

"Do it I tell ye, Mars' Jim. Don't he say he kill us bofe if yer don't? Now I am n't jis' ready to gib up de ghost yet, Mars' Jim—not while dar am sich a chance as dis fur keepin' on top de groun'. No, Mars' Jim! So ye jis' make up yer mind fur doin' dat unbuttonin' business or you're 'sponsible fur dis niggab's death, shoah."

This aspect of the case had not struck the lieutenant before. Should he decline the test he would really sentence not only himself but his fellow-scout to death, while a loop hole of escape—though confessedly narrow—yet lay open before them.

Sam had declared his choice, so but one course was left for him to follow.

"You are really in earnest, Samson?" he asked. "Remember it is one chance out of a hundred that I hit the mark, and a good many more that I hit you."

Sam signified that he was in earnest, and furthermore that he had not the slightest fear of being hurt by the lieutenant's aim.

"I will do it," declared the latter, suddenly. "Step off the distance, Senor Balboaz, and may Heaven direct my aim."

The bandit captain had been watching with a complacent smile the mental torture of the lieutenant. At the last words he laughed gleefully.

"Ha! ha! A very appropriate prayer for a character like that you give yourself and your dark-skinned friend. However, it is well you have decided at last; we shall now see whether you are the bona fide Texas Jim. Pedro, dismount, and step off twelve paces directly north."

The latter command was addressed to one of the Mexican horsemen, who immediately proceeded to obey it.

The twelve paces were stepped off over the baked soil that echoed back the Mexican's footsteps. Sam was bidden to station himself at the limit thus reached.

He stood with his face to the east. The light of the moon shone directly against him, bringing into plain view the polished brass buttons of his blue riding coat. He had buttoned his coat up to his chin, taking care to push the ends of a flannel comforter, worn about his neck, underneath, causing the top portion of his garment to protrude rather prominently.

Sam, though he had expressed confidence in the lieutenant's aim, was prudent.

There he stood, stiff as a statue or a post, or any other object remarkable for stability. A little nervous it must be confessed.

The Mexican, Pedro, had taken the precaution to tie his hands behind him.

Meanwhile, exactly twelve paces to the south, Richard Moore had dismounted; and examining the pair of revolvers he wore, selected the most suitable for the trying experiment.

By his side still sat Balboaz, surveying the operations with his eternal smile.

"Are you ready, Senor Jim? Take as long aim as you like. I shall ride on and observe its effects."

Thus said the Spaniard. He then touched his horse and rode onward, halting a few paces in front of Sam.

The lieutenant is ready. He raises his revolver—a trusty weapon which has never once failed him—and takes aim at the small glittering speck just visible beneath Sam's chin.

Ah, what emotions stir his heart at that critical moment! What a temptation to turn the deadly weapon but an inch upon the crafty villain so calmly watching the issue of the fearful test!

But with iron nerve he steadies the aim upon that glittering point. First a voiceless prayer,

then a single sharp report rings out upon the night air.

A hush like that of death reigns for a moment over the scattered group.

In another instant the light smoke has cleared away, and lo! the young lieutenant, his nerves all unstrung after the fearful strain, beholds Sam standing erect and uninjured.

With a cry of joy he hastens up.

The Mexican horsemen, almost bursting with curiosity, flock around.

Sam was the first to speak:

"Hurrah, Mars' Jim! I knowed you'd do it. Yer shaved dat dar button off clean as a whistle."

Moore could not speak for a minute, the relief was so sudden and immense.

One of the Mexicans had dismounted and was searching for the button. A cry soon announced its discovery, a few yards in advance of Sam's stand-point.

At sight of the brass button, a shred of blue cloth still clinging to it, even those swarthy cat-le raiders sent up a shout of applause.

Balboaz now advanced on his white steed and at his command the button was handed to him. He looked at it a moment and observed the small dent in one side showing that it had been hit squarely, and was torn from its fastening as neatly as Sam had so expressively said.

"Let me congratulate you, Senor Jim," he said, turning to the bogus Jim. "You have both made an extraordinary shot and fully convinced me that I was wrong in doubting you. For the latter I beg your pardon and hope that you will forget this unpleasant affair in our future friendship."

With which polite apology he extended one slender white hand, smooth and polished as marble.

It went sorely against the grain with the young officer to take the proffered hand after what had passed; but policy overruled passion and the two shook hands.

"And now, senor," continued Balboaz, holding up the button, "I ask a slight favor. May I keep this brass button as a memento of our first meeting? It will always recall to me the most perfect shot I ever witnessed."

"You must ask Samson there," replied the lieutenant, smiling faintly. "The peril was all his and the button is rightly his property."

Balboaz repeated his request to the negro.

"I has no 'bjections," was Sam's reply. "All the same," he added to himself, "I's boun' to hab dat button 'n' your heart's blood wid it, Misto' Hernan Bilboes!"

CHAPTER VII.

MOORE PLAYS DETECTIVE.

THE party turned to the river, led by Balboaz, who now treated the new acquaintance as courteously as though no unpleasant affair had occurred.

He even made one of his followers dismount and give place to Sam, which was not done without much flrice though inaudible muttering on the part of the Mexican thus summarily treated.

Thus, Moore and the bandit chief in front, the rest following in the rear, the whole procession recrossed the river and turned downstream to the camp of the cattle-raiders a few rods below.

As hinted a few chapters back, the band of raiders had driven their cattle into the river on the approach of the prairie fire, and had themselves taken refuge in the same convenient shelter. After the passage of the flames they drove the herd out on the eastern bank and encamped in the small grove of peach and willow-trees bordering the stream.

These groves, like little oases, are scattered at wide intervals over the fertile prairies of South-western Texas. Strangely enough each grove will consist but of a single species—either plum, peach, pecan or live-oak. The space beneath the tree is entirely free from bushes or undergrowth and covered with the most delightfully green sward imaginable. In the summer and autumn seasons the tired wanderer over these boundless plains hails the leafy oasis as a veritable paradise where he can lie in the cool shade and regale himself with luscious fruits unstintedly.

Such a spot had the cattle-raiders found and now desecrated with their presence.

The band—more than three-fourths of them—were Apache Indians. The rest a motley collection of ruffians from all climes and countries; native Mexicans, half-breeds, a few Chinese, etc.

There was but one hut, set in the very center of the grove.

This was set apart for the chief, Balboaz.

The rest simply cast themselves along the green sward beneath the trees, here untouched by the fire that all around had wrought devastation.

A part were detached to guard the cattle outside the grove.

It was into this mixed assembly of outcasts of every grade of savagery and crime that the two scouts were about to be introduced.

As Balboaz and his two friends (?) entered the grove, a throng of Indians and others crowded

around the two men, whom they at first took to be captives.

Their leader soon enlightened them.

He cried to them in Spanish:

"Friends, this is Texas Jim, of whom you have all heard, and his black partner, Samson, whose great strength will make him quite an addition to the band."

Sam had already dismounted, and as he was standing by his horse, watching with much curiosity the savage faces around him, an enormously big Indian stepped up and without ceremony extended one huge paw in token of amity.

"Ugh! big man!—shake."

These were his words, uttered in a hoarse, guttural voice.

Sam grasped the proffered hand and squeezed it.

The savage uttered a howl of pain and withdrew his hand, the fingers nearly crushed.

"What you holler so for, red-skin?" laughed Sam. "You've no mo' grit dan a squaw."

This remark excited the Indian's ire to boiling-point. With a series of ughs, he aimed a right-hander at Sam that might have felled an ox, but the black Hercules caught the blow on his right arm, and with his left sent in a counter-blow that landed full on the Apache's chest. The blow resounded as if from a drum and the ugh that came from that Indian was immense.

Before he could recover, Sam, concentrating his immense strength in his right arm, delivered a blow straight between the eyes.

The result was astounding even to himself, for over went the red-skin as if from a rocket. His head touched the ground once, then, turning a complete somersault, his big feet striking with great force into the stomach of a Spaniard standing by.

The Spaniard yelled and crawled away with his hands on his organ of digestion. The Indian lay for a few moments motionless, then slowly rose to a standing position.

"Ugh! ugh! No use fight black-man.—Got thunderbolt in him arm," and he retired to his blanket.

This by-play served to raise greatly in the estimation of the band of Indians and outlaws the two new additions to their number. Among all rude and savage races there is nothing that excites applause so quickly as a remarkable exhibition of physical force.

The bandit chief had watched the contest of the negro and Indian with a smile of amusement on his countenance. He now turned to Lieutenant Moore.

"You did not boast, senor, when you said you possessed the best of comrades. Your Samson is really an acquisition. Would that I had a few such in my band."

"You could not persuade me to part with Samson, particularly after the events of this night," was Moore's reply.

"I would not ask it. I value your feelings too highly," was the courteous reply.

For all that Hernan Balboaz had resolved to rank Sam among the number of his followers.

"Will you share my tent to-night? It is at your service," said Balboaz as the two reached the center of the grove and halted before the small white tent.

"If it does not incommode you," replied the soldier.

"Not in the least."

The two entered. Richard Moore looked and was somewhat astonished at the manner in which the tent was furnished.

A silver lamp swung from the center, casting a mild light around the interior. Its rays fell upon a small camp-bed of elegantly wrought iron, which could be taken apart or put together at a moment's notice.

A rug of brilliant design almost covered the grassy sward that formed the floor of the tent. Two or three folding-chairs scattered around a small table in the center, completed the furniture. A number of glittering arms—swords, pistols, and slender stilettoes, the favorite weapon of the treacherous Spaniard, hung around the sides of the white canvas.

"You see I am a man of luxurious tastes, Senor Jim," said the Creole, as he noted the lieutenant's glance. "It is unfortunate or the noted Hernan Balboaz might have been a quite different character."

"Make yourself at home," he added, waving him to a camp-stool. "You will excuse me a few minutes as I must hunt up my lieutenant and give him a few commands."

He bowed and with a quick, light step left the tent.

Hardly had he disappeared through the canvas opening than a sudden change transformed the lieutenant's features.

"The time has come," he muttered softly, and withdrawing his heavy cavalry boots he followed stealthily in the rear of the bandit captain.

With a step perfectly noiseless on the grassy carpeting he followed him beneath the dense shadow of the trees.

Balboaz had not proceeded far when he met one of his subordinates, a Mexican.

To him he spoke a few words in a low voice and the man darted off through the grove,

amid the scattered groups of Indians and half-breeds evidently in search of the lieutenant.

Balboaz seated himself upon a prostrate log that lay against the trunk of an immense willow. The shadow was almost impenetrable.

There he waited patiently the approach of his subordinate.

Once and once only he looked behind him into the dense shadows of the grove as if a slight noise had attracted him.

Whether or no he had heard anything, he dismissed the idea for he still retained his seat upon the log.

Yet strange to say an observer close enough to distinguish his features would have seen a queer smile flickering on the firmly arched lips.

The lieutenant came—a short, low-browed man of rough exterior.

After the first greetings, the chief gave his orders;

"Pedro, you will start in two hours for the San Juan crossing-place. We have tarried long enough—by to-morrow's eve we must be on Mexican ground."

"Won't that be too soon, cap'n? The cattle are dead-tired."

"Two hours' rest will put them in good trim."

Richard Moore had heard enough. He crept from his hiding-place behind the huge willow, whose shadow had so effectually shielded him, and made all haste back to the tent.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BOLD PUSH FOR LIBERTY.

WHEN Richard Moore reached the tent he lost no time in pulling on his boots, and seating himself on a camp-stool, he looked around for some mode of whiling away the time till the bandit captain's return.

His eye fell upon a leather-bound volume lying on the small table in the center of the canvas-walled chamber. He took it up, and found it to be a copy of Don Quixote in the original.

"The fellow has some literary taste," thought the lieutenant as he opened the book. As he idly turned the leaves his eyes fell upon three lines written in Spanish on a fly-leaf:

"TO HERNAN BALBOAZ ON HIS 14TH BIRTHDAY,

From his Father

S. MAPIMI, MEXICO, 1859."

It was the last line that interested the soldier.

In San Mapimi the famous bandit chief had been born and raised, and near San Mapimi lay most probably his secret head-quarters somewhere in the recesses of the great Sierra range at the foot of which the town lay.

The book itself no longer interested the lieutenant. He restored it to its former position on the table, while he gave himself up to reflections as to what he should do next.

The point at which the band would cross the Rio Grande with their stolen cattle, into Mexico, was known to him.

All that remained was to get word as quickly as possible to Colonel Harrison who had promised to lead a part of the garrison from Fort B—to a point on the river not far off.

Should he get to him in time they would be able to place themselves in such a position as to completely subdue the band of cattle-raiders with their stolen herds.

He fancied, however, there would be some difficulty in escaping from Balboaz so abruptly without exciting that person's suspicions.

The latter at length returned and was greeted by Moore with these words:

"I must give you news very disagreeable to myself, captain."

"What is it?"

"I must be in Presidio to-morrow at nine precisely. I had forgotten it totally; your pursuit of me so disarranged my thoughts."

"Is it an appointment?"

"Yes, and a very important one."

"Well, senor, I shall not interfere with your arrangements in the least. But I must ask you one favor."

"What is that?"

"Allow me to retain your man Samson a day or so with me. I give you my word he shall be returned."

Moore at once suspected the purpose of his cunning acquaintance, and was on his guard.

"For what would you want Samson—and for so short a time?"

"Can you ask? He has the strength of any three men in the band, and so long as I am on this dangerous soil every man counts. Of course I expect his aid in the event of a fight."

The lieutenant knew this was merely a cloak for some other design and was resolved not to forsake his faithful follower.

"I am sorry to refuse you, Hernan; but Samson and I are inseparable after this night's occurrences."

Balboaz looked disappointed. He said sarcastically:

"I admire your attachment, Senor Jim. I really should not have expected it in a man of your character."

Moore felt the point. At the same time an uneasy feeling crept over him that instead of deceiving this man he was himself being fooled. He dismissed the idea, however, as absurd, and bravely retorted:

"I hope, captain, your profession has not deadened in you all human sentiments or feelings of friendship. I should be very sorry indeed if it had."

It was the bandit's turn to wince. A frown contracted his pale brow, while he passed one hand lightly across his forehead.

"Let us waive that," he said slowly. "When do you start?"

"This instant, if I wish to make the distance in time."

"I will not detain you longer, then. Farewell, senor, and a prosperous journey."

He extended his hand. Moore grasped it, then with a slight bow left the tent.

Was it fancy, or did he really hear a low, sardonic laugh from within, as he stepped rapidly beneath the dense shadows of the trees?

He dismissed the thought, however, as fantastic, and made all haste in hunting up Sam who had been left to make friends with the dusky Apaches and their white allies.

He found most of the band asleep, lying on the fresh smooth sward, some wrapped in blankets, some with no covering at all. Several fires had been built for broiling venison and fresh buffalo steak shot the day before. This, with the dessert of ripe, luscious peaches hanging from every bough made a palatable meal for these free and easy rovers.

The fires, however, had been suffered to die down as the night following the hot autumn day was warm and sultry.

Sam is at length found amid a group of three—two Indians and one Mexican—entertaining them in his own quaint dialect, with a recital of some of his adventures.

A large heap of the rich fruit, collected from the trees around, is piled up before him; and the rapidity with which that pile diminishes shows that Sam's mind is equally divided between talking and eating.

"Come, Sam, we must be movin'," said the lieutenant, who could not restrain a smile at the scene before him.

Sam, seeing the lieutenant was in earnest, immediately rose and bade adieu to his new-found acquaintances; not neglecting to cram his pockets with peaches, and to heave a parting sigh that he must leave so much good fruit behind.

"Where are the horses, Sam?" was Moore's first question.

"Yourn am out at de edge of de grove. As for po' Jim he am in glory, I hope. Leastways de flames has done fur him."

"You must be furnished with a horse, Sam."

"Dat am gospel trufe; 'n' seein' as how Misto' Bilboes hab 'propriated a good menny widouten lebe, I move we in'stute an akshun fur rekubery as de lawyers hab it."

"You mean we shall take one of the stolen horses?"

"No, sah. It would take a deal too much trouble ter ketch 'm, not ter speak ob saddlin' an' bridlin' 'n' mebbey breakin' 'm in arterwards as dey are mostly wild colts."

"But, Sam, it would hardly be according to the law and constitution to take one belonging to the band."

"Neces'ty am de law out hyar, Mars' Moore. Specially when dere am sich a lot ob rogues as dese to deal wid."

"Well, Sam, we'll try it. Where are the horses hitched?"

"Outside de grove."

"Is there any guard?"

"No, sah. All de guard am wid de stolen cattle."

"Then the affair will be easy enough."

They proceeded to the end of the grove indicated, where the horses, nearly a hundred in number, were hitched in rows to the trees.

As Sam had stated, there was no guard and there would be no difficulty in selecting a steed fitted to the negro's size and weight.

The moon, also, was beginning to sink in the east, and the darkness was more intense.

Nevertheless they stepped cautiously amid the dense shadows.

Moore soon found his own steed and mounted. Sam's horse is at length chosen—a large, dark bay of splendid mettle and strength of limb.

It took but a moment for Sam to mount his already saddled steed, and side by side the two rode at a gentle pace away from the grove.

They rode along the river-side southward.

They were just increasing their pace to a gallop and imagined themselves safely away when a startling interruption occurred.

Out from a thicket, right on the river's bank, came hissing a long, slender rope ending in a noose.

That noose encircled Sam's body, falling down over his breast, and ere he could form a thought of resistance or struggle, the tightened lasso dragged him to the ground, while the frightened horse galloped away over the plain.

CHAPTER IX.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

So sudden was the onslaught upon Sam, and so taken by surprise was the lieutenant, that his horse, frightened by the strange proceeding, had galloped fully a rod before he was brought to a stand.

Then Moore's first impulse was to dash back upon the waylayers, whoever they were, and rescue Sam at whatever risk to his own person and liberty.

But as he turned and looked back through the obscurity he could see no trace of Sam's captors or of Sam himself.

They had vanished from sight and hearing as completely as though like phantoms they had faded into air.

Then he reflected that this capture was evidently a pre-arrangement on the part of Balboaz, originating in an intense desire to make Sam an addition to his band of followers, and therefore that no personal danger to the negro scout was involved in this summary attack.

Further, he need not greatly concern himself as to Sam's temporary loss, for would not the whole band attempt a crossing at San Juan the very next day? And should he make all haste with his news to Colonel Harrison and his squad of cavalry, would they not all be entrapped in the very act of escaping with their ill-gotten plunder?

Sam would thus have a speedy release—the stolen herds be recovered—and Balboaz, with his savage band, be either slain or captured.

Such was the prospect which the lieutenant flattered himself there seemed every reason to hope for, provided he hastened on and made no delay in a Quixotic attempt to rescue his negro friend.

Imagine, therefore, Richard Moore again started with fresh speed on his long night-ride of twenty miles. Across prairie and water-course he gallops to the promised rendezvous with Colonel Harrison and his two hundred cavalry.

The colonel, faithful to promise, had led his company about forty miles up the Rio Grande early that same morning, and was now encamped on a lonely but picturesque bluff overlooking the broad river.

The wearied troopers, wrapped in blankets or buffalo robes, their heads pillowed on saddles, had passed the night on the bare ground, here covered with a short growth of dry, mesquite grass.

The dry, sultry night made this exposure rather agreeable than otherwise.

A faint, roseate light had just begun to appear in the east, and one early riser after another, among them the colonel, was slowly stretching himself awake or briskly jumping up, when the gallop of hoofs sounded from the north.

A few minutes, and Richard Moore on his black mare came galloping into the startled camp, effectually rousing those not already awake.

An eager group soon crowded around him. Amid these the tall, commanding figure of Colonel Harrison soon appeared, the men respectfully giving way on either side.

"You are sooner than I expected, Moore. What news?"

"Good and bad, colonel. I have found out where Balboaz will cross this very day; but Sam is left a captive in the brigand's hands."

"That is unfortunate; but, if your first report is true, it can easily be remedied. Where is the crossing-place?"

"At San Juan."

"San Juan?" repeated the colonel. "That is but ten miles further up. But can we get there in time? Do you know when he will arrive at San Juan?"

"Some time between noon and night. Not sooner, with the immense drove they have on their hands."

"Are you certain that your information is correct?"

"As certain as that I am alive, colonel. The circumstances were such that I could not be mistaken."

"I am anxious to know those circumstances. But there is not a moment to waste. We will reserve your adventures till we are in the saddle. Meantime, to breakfast; doubtless you are both hungry and tired?"

"Spell them with capitals, colonel, and you will come near it," laughed the lieutenant.

Richard Moore did not exaggerate. The exciting adventures of the day before and his long night-ride had told severely even on his strong, youthful frame.

He dismounted and followed the colonel to an appetizing breakfast of broiled steak and corn-cake, washed down with pure, cold water from a spring that gushed forth at the foot of the bluff.

His horse was carefully groomed and fed by willing hands, and in half an hour, the time allotted for the morning meal, all were again ready for the saddle.

The word to mount and away was given, and the whole troop of near two hundred were soon in marching order, the colonel and Richard Moore taking the lead.

Moore had commenced telling his adventures at breakfast, and during the brisk morning ride to San Juan had ample time to finish the narrative.

It took less than two hours to make the journey to the small mud hamlet of San Juan. The town was built in a depression of the steep bluff that formed in this section the winding bank of the Rio Grande.

The colonel avoided entering the town, peopled as it was by a few hundred of the rough bordermen, with a plentiful mixture of "Greasers."

He knew that a large number of these men were secretly in alliance with the cattle-raiders; or, indifferent so long as they themselves were uninjured.

He therefore made a long detour, and being on high ground, while the town lay under the bluff, he readily avoided being seen.

About a mile from the town a narrow defile opened into the high ground, through which herdsman were compelled to drive their cattle to reach the low ground, and the ford of San Juan.

Both sides of this defile were clothed with bushes and thick-branching trees, forming an admirable means of concealment for any one wishing to intercept a party bound for the ford below.

It was amid these bushes, and along the rugged sides that our colonel posted his men. So cleverly were they hidden by the thick screen of vegetation, that not a blue-coat was visible.

Moore was sent out upon the plain to reconnoiter, and announce the approach of the raiders.

It was full noon by the time these arrangements were completed.

There came a long and weary season of waiting.

Hour after hour passes. Two, three, four o'clock, and still they wait.

The hot sun pours down through the leaves upon the heads of the weary soldiers—pours down till it becomes almost insufferable, and there is a general unbuttoning of waistcoats and doffing of caps.

Four, five o'clock, and still no sign of the cattle-raiders.

The colonel becomes furiously impatient. He has already sent a full dozen times to Lieutenant Moore.

At length seven o'clock shows itself on the face of the colonel's gold watch.

The gang of raiders are as invisible as though they had no existence.

Darkness has fallen like a soft mantle over the broad prairie. The thoroughly disheartened colonel is about giving up in despair, when a sound reaches his ear that thrills his heart with expectation.

It is a horse's gallop—nay, there are two of them—the hoof-beats sounding in swift unison.

And the next moment two dark forms plunge into the defile, and rein up before the colonel. He gives a cry of surprise.

One is Richard Moore, the other Sam, without coat or hat, and mounted on a wild mustang.

CHAPTER X.

SAM'S NARRATIVE.

THEY were—in truth—the two scouts.

Richard Moore first spoke.

"Colonel, I have come to tell you that I've been fooled—most outrageously fooled. I shall be a laughing stock at the post for a year to come."

"Why, what's the matter?" asked the colonel.

"Sam here will tell you. Out with it, Sam. Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings."

The tone with which all this was said showed that the lieutenant's feelings were hurt considerably.

Sam started in reluctantly.

"Shoah, it war a big swindle all roun'. But I bet this mustang ag'inst nothin' dat nobody else would ha' done enny better; no not Tim Carson hisself," he concluded earnestly.

"Go on with the story, Sam. Never mind smoothing it over," said Moore.

"Wal, to come to de pint, yer euchered completely, kurnel. Dat serpent in human form, Bilboes, am crossed two hours ago, ten miles up."

The colonel was silent a moment, astounded by these ill tidings.

"Ten miles above," he at length repeated.

"What fording-place is that?"

"One berry little used. A man by de name ob Lester libs clost by, wid a large family, mostly gyrls. He did hab de biggest ranch 'n' de mostest cattle ob enny man in dis section. But Jerusalem! didn't dat ar' Creole turn things topsy-turvy?"

"How so?"

"Fust he drobe off all de cattle—knocked de old man senseless; then wound up by carryin' off de oldest darter who am purty as a picter."

"And you—how did you manage to escape?"

The negro drew a long breath, and continued:

"Wal, in de fust place I s'pose you am 'quainted wid how I wer' drug off'n my horse."

wid a lasso. Arterward dey haied me into a boat so quick I hadn't time to think—"

"Well," said the colonel, as Sam paused.

"Wal, dey had me boun' 'n' helpless as a log 'n' so dey brought me afore Cap'n Hernan as dey calls him."

"And this captain—"

"Up 'n' tole me as how he had played a cleber trick on de lieutenant 'n' me. How he knew all de time as we were army scouts—or spies, 'ca'se he had seen me only a month ago on de Uppe Grande, an' foun' out who I am."

"That was a misfortune. So the Texas Jim ruse was a failure?"

"A spoilt egg entirely. Do it war no fault ob de lieutenant's. He played his part to perfection. If only I hedn't went on dat unlucky trail!"

"I blame neither of you," said the colonel, gravely. "You were unlucky, that was all. What else did he say?"

"How he hab taken a fancy to yer bumble sarvent 'cause I had de strength 'n' grit. 'N' how he war goin' to train me to knock ober his enemies 'stead ob his frien's; do he might train till doomsday for de matta ob dat."

The colonel smiled.

"No fear of your fidelity, Sam."

"Den he say how he send off Lieutenant Moore wid a false report so as to put de regulars on a wrong scent."

"That he has done too successfully. Was that all?"

"Shoab, dat am all he sed. De rest war doin'. De whole band were roused—horses saddled—'n' de march begun. I wur strapped to dis animile yer see me on—wid my hands tied ahind me. Two big Injuns on both sides holdin' de bridle. Not much chance fur to run away, kurnel?"

The colonel nodded.

"So we rode mighty slow till we got to Lester's late dis evenin'. Den dey halted. De captain wid four ob his best men enters de house. Nearly all de rest war gallopin' aroun' de kuntry gatherin' in cattle."

"All dis time I war thinkin' ob gettin' loose. Nearly de whole journey I kept up a sly twist-in' an' pullin' at de cords aroun' my wrists."

"Dem 'ar cords war awful tight, 'n' wuss yet dem red-skins took a look at 'em ebery 'alf hour. Den I had to play 'possum."

"By 'n' by dem cords begun to loosen, but I kept mighty quiet till we reached der Lester ranch. Dere de Injuns became 'sited 'n' looked as though they wanted bad to take a share in de rumpus dereselbes."

"I watched my chances. All to once a shrill cry dat struck me to de marrow it war so despairin'-like sounded from de house. Dat cry 'tracted de Injuns. Dey turned dere heads away to listen."

"Dat wer' all I wanted. I giv' a pow'ful pull an' off went dem cords in a second. Fore you could count ten I upset dem red-skins from dere hosses an' was off like a flash."

"I giv' a shout an' away I went like de wind, but not afore I saw dat Bilboes comin' from de house wid de purtiest dark-haired girl in his arms, 'n' Major Lester lyin' cross de do'-sill wid his head bleedin'."

"De rest ob de band war scattered, so I got a mile away 'fore dey missed me. They tried to ketch me, but giv' it up. So yer see I'm here, kurnel, sound as a nut."

As Sam finished, Moore broke in with:

"You have heard all, colonel. It is disgraceful. To be tricked in this manner—I deserve to be cashiered."

"Not a bit of it," said the colonel, kindly.

"You did the very best in your power. Many, even trained scouts, would not have acted so shrewdly. It was only an unlucky accident that turned the tables on you."

"Thank you, said the lieutenant, deeply moved. "Though your words do not remove my opinion of my lack of common-sense, they encourage me to ask of you one favor."

"It is granted, for I know you would ask nothing unreasonable. What is the favor?"

"This: that you commission Sam and myself to run down this villain to his most secret den. To seek out his head-quarters, and, at the proper moment, with the aid of your troops, surprise him and his band and sweep them from the face of the earth."

"You undertake a great responsibility," answered the colonel reflectively. "Have you considered that you work on Mexican ground when probably every other man is his ally and confederate? You have witnessed one example of the man's cunning; are you willing to enter the lists again?"

"Trust me, colonel—I mean to employ all the time, energy, and brain I possess in the enterprise. Though duped once it will only render me the more cautious next time."

"Good! I see you have the right metal in you. I know of no two men in the State I would rather send on such a mission. Besides, there is a lady in the case, which should incite you to greater effort."

"A lady—who?"

"You heard Sam refer to her—Major Lester's eldest daughter. They say she is a most beautiful girl, and this villainous Creole, like

the robber-knights of old, has borne her off to his hidden castle."

"Lester! Lester!" repeated the lieutenant, slowly. "Why, I knew a family of that name in South Carolina."

"I know nothing of them, save that his name is Major Richard Lester, and that he has been here a little over two years."

"Richard Lester!" again exclaimed the young man, excitedly. "Why, I was named after him, and I and Birdie, his eldest daughter, were playmates."

"Possibly they are the same. Though it is strange that you should know nothing of their emigrating to this State."

"Not at all. Remember, I spent four years at West Point. When I returned they had disappeared. And now I remember, there was a faint rumor that they had removed to Texas. Oh, if it is the same, and it is his daughter that villain has stolen!"

"There is hardly a doubt, if what you say is true."

The young soldier drew himself up to his full six feet, and his fine eyes glowed with resolution, as he said:

"If it is true, colonel, Heaven itself has chosen me for this undertaking. It is a necessity that must be accomplished. Life—health—all that is dear to man's happiness shall be exhausted until Birdie Lester is freed from that accursed bandit's grasp."

CHAPTER XI.

MONTEZUMA, THE INDIAN.

"Be careful, Sam!"

"Sartin, I is careful; but dese rocks do beat all fur rollin'."

"Thank Heaven, we're at the top! Lay low, Sam, I heard voices," whispered the young officer.

"An' I see sights—Jerusalem! but just look there!"

Our two friends had trailed Balboaz and his cattle-raiders thus far into the mountains of Northern Mexico.

Immediately after the severe disappointment at San Juan, and the news of the fresh outrage on Major Lester's family, he, in company with the faithful Sam, had set out on his self-imposed mission. He had arranged with Colonel Harrison that the latter should follow after a short interval, and combining with the Mexican troops make a clean sweep of the banditti in their rocky fastnesses.

There was much preliminary work to be done first, and which he and Sam must do alone. The mission became to him doubly solemn and even sacred when he learned, as he did for certain, on visiting the stricken family, that the fair girl so abruptly torn from parents and household ties, was really his friend and playmate of bygone years—Birdie Lester!

After offering all the consolation in his power to the sorrowful and anxious parents, to whom his sudden appearance seemed providential, he crossed the river, and once more on Mexican ground, took up the trail of his wily foe.

Together the two scouts, well-mounted and plentifully provided with fire arms, crossed the fertile belt of prairie-land skirting the Rio Grande.

The well-defined trail soon led them into higher and more barren ground, sparsely covered with vegetation.

Then the trail began to scatter. Balboaz was too cautious to travel far with so unusual a stock of cattle.

No less than three different parties separated from the main body, taking roads that led to the chief market-towns of the interior. Each division taking away a considerable portion of the original herd.

By the time they reached the outer spurs of the great Sierra Madre range the band of raiders was reduced to but half its original numbers, and nearly all the stolen cattle were disposed of.

One less trained to shrewd reflection than Richard Moore might have been perplexed by these frequent off-shoots from the main-body of the enemy. But always the straight trail led to the mountains, that branching off to the thickly-settled plains of the interior.

He quickly concluded that the former would be the choice of the bandit chief, since he would naturally choose the most secret and remote quarters in which to secure his greatest prize—the beautiful Birdie Lester; so he clung to the straight course, and on the evening of the third day had penetrated some distance into the mountains.

As yet they had not come within sight of the bandits.

Not but they might have accomplished it with ease long before, but they had considered it too hazardous on the level plains. Now the nature of the ground rendered it comparatively safe.

Sam and the lieutenant had just hitched their horses in a deep ravine amid a sheltered group of the broad-leaved magnolia. They also concealed their rifles in a hollow log close by.

This operation was caused by the knowledge

that their enemies were directly in front though they knew not the exact locality.

The road they had traversed was become a mere bridle-path, and at this point wound around a steep ridge. On one hand the side, sloping down into a deep ravine, was thickly clothed with trees, ferns and semi-tropical vegetation. The other rose, at a very abrupt angle to the hight of nearly a hundred yards.

The slope was nearly destitute of vegetation, and covered with loose stone.

This ridge the two scouts had agreed to ascend in order to gain a favorable outlook upon the other side.

After some scrambling the two had reached the wished-for point, where ensued the short colloquy quoted above.

At Sam's exclamation, which was spoken in a guarded tone, Richard Moore glanced in the direction indicated.

The sight that met his gaze was both strange and perplexing.

First, a narrow glade through which flowed a clear, sparkling rivulet, clothed on either side with grass so green that it rejoiced the eye to gaze upon it. In this glade were encamped what remained of the band of raiders.

The horses were grazing delightedly off the fresh grass; while a rude supper was being discussed by their masters.

But it was not this that drew the gaze of the two scouts.

In a grove to the left screened by the thick branches from the view of the rest of the band, but visible to the two friends another scene was being enacted.

Balboaz and four of his chief subordinates, native Mexicans, were standing around a man of peculiar mien and aspect.

This man's hands were tied behind him. He was tall in stature, and stood straight as a palm-tree. His skin was of a bright, coppery hue, even more so than belongs, in general, to the Indian race.

There was not a particle of redundant flesh on his tall, erect frame. At first sight he seemed not to possess more than ordinary muscular strength. Yet the four Mexicans watched his every movement with what seemed foolish caution.

The Indian regarded his captors with a cold, contemptuous yet strangely dignified look.

The grove in which these six characters stood was almost directly beneath the point occupied by Richard Moore and Sam.

The words exchanged in the little clump of trees were faintly but distinctly heard through the still evening air.

Balboaz spoke just as they had settled themselves in a listening position.

"Do you still refuse?" he said, addressing the Indian.

He spoke in a threatening tone.

The Indian merely nodded. He did not deign a more definite answer.

"Do you not prefer life to the possession of this paltry secret?"

This time the answer came in good, plain Spanish:

"You call it a paltry secret, senor—then why are you so anxious to obtain it?"

Balboaz was silenced for a moment—but only a moment.

"Because to me it would be of the greatest use—to you it is none."

And what sort of use? The base luxury of a robber and spendthrift.

"Basely or not—use it I shall; as you will find to your cost."

The bandit's manner now changed entirely.

He spoke to the four Mexicans in a tone of command.

"Pedro, unbind the prisoner. Gonuz, run to the tent and fetch a rope, thin but strong. We'll show this copperhead Montezuma that Spaniards now as of old know how to conquer a stubborn will."

The tyrant's orders were quickly obeyed. The Indian's bonds were cut and the rope soon appeared.

The cruel intention of Balboaz became but too apparent.

At his orders the rope was tied about the thumb of the Indian; the other end was flung across a stout limb of the tree beneath which they stood. Three men then grasped the loose end, and, with a united pull drew the unfortunate man clear of the ground.

"Now, hang there!" was the exclamation of this human fiend when these operations were completed: "Hang there, until you see fit to alter your resolution and reveal the secret."

Those who have never experienced the inhuman torture to which the Indian was subjected, can form no conception of its severity.

The suspension of one's whole weight upon the single joint of the thumb produces unexorcising pain, comparable only to that of the rack.

There the Indian hung, ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. Still not moved, altered his fixed, contemptuous smile.

"Can we stand this?" asked Moore, above, of Sam.

"No, sah. Dis niggah sha'n't—not anoder second."

"Now for my marksmanship, Sam," and the

lieutenant took careful aim amid the group with his best revolver.

A sharp explosion—then, for a single instant not a sound disturbed the solemn stillness of the twilight.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXCITING STRUGGLE.

FOR a little while Sam was sure the lieutenant's aim had been directed at the bandit chief, Balboaz.

His astonishment was great, therefore, on seeing that individual still stand erect and uninjured after the swift bullet had sped its course.

It was quite a different phenomenon that met his gaze.

The bullet had been destined for no human body, but for the rope, drawn taut by the three Mexicans, and to which the cruelly-tortured Indian hung suspended by the thumb.

It had struck but a foot above his outstretched arm, and divided the slender rope as neatly as though cut with a knife.

The three men pulling upon the other end fell backward, sprawling.

The new state of affairs thus ushered upon the scene was something wonderful.

The Indian, who, a moment before, had been the image of patient suffering, no sooner felt his feet touch the ground than he became transformed to a very demon of vengeance.

Balboaz, rushing forward to prevent his escape, received a terrific blow between the eyes that stretched him senseless.

Then, springing forward, he seized a dagger from the bandit chief's girdle, and with a swift, panther-like bound, was upon the other three before they had fairly risen to their feet.

The wrongs of all the Montezumas glittered in his black eyes as he raised the sharp, burnished steel in his right hand—once, twice, thrice—so swift that the three motions seemed as one, and his three tormentors lay writhing on the green sod.

The fourth Mexican, whom these swift and startling changes had utterly bewildered, gave one yell and darted away toward the camp of cattle-raiders.

The Indian glanced around on the senseless Balboaz and the three dead Mexicans, the same cold smile of contempt on his features. Once he advanced a step toward the former, a deadly intent gleaming in his black eyes.

But he thought better of his resolution. He turned away with a muttered exclamation. Confused noises from the camp above caught his ear.

Another moment wasted and the whole band would be upon him.

"I must away," was his exclamation; and shaking his right hand, which still clutched the bloody dagger, defiantly in the direction of the raiders' camp, he darted away with long, swift bounds in the opposite direction.

As it happened, the green vale terminated but a few hundred yards to the left—the direction taken by the Indian—in a narrow, tortuous pass, hemmed in by towering cliffs, rugged and mountainous in the extreme.

Near the entrance this pass divided into two branches; down one of which foamed and sparkled the little rivulet that furnished moisture to the little valley.

Another turned off to the east, winding upward and onward amid a bewildering mass of rocks, trees, and deep crevices.

Up this latter path the Aztec bounded and soon disappeared into the recesses of the mountain.

These events, so swift were the actions of the Indian, had occupied but a moment, and had occurred in plain view of the two scouts.

From their commanding position they could look over the whole valley and the movements of the cattle-raiders were discernible as well as the dead bodies of the Mexicans in the grove.

Up to this time they had preserved a profound silence.

They were thrilled and wonder-struck.

"What think you of that, Sam?" was Moore's remark after he had seen the Indian disappear.

"Beats all creation, it do."

"You've found your match at last. Even you could not have played the 'knock down and clean out' game to such perfection."

"Don't talk, Mars' Moore. When it comes to knifin' fellows in dat style, I see nowhar."

"There come the rest of them," exclaimed Moore, as he saw the band of raiders running toward the little grove.

The two men had unconsciously raised their voices, thinking there was no one in the grove who could hear them.

As the lieutenant concluded his last remark, Sam said in a low, warning tone:

"Mars' Moore—"

"What is it, Sam?" said Moore, lowering his tone in surprise.

"Shoah's you am libin', I saw dat Bilboes wid his eyes open jes' now!"

The lieutenant looked anxiously at the prostrate body.

"Nonsense, Sam; you are mistaken. He lays as senseless as a log."

"Don't you fool yerself. He am playin' 'possum, shoah."

Before any other remark could be made, the band of raiders burst into the grove.

A shout of mingled rage and wonderment arose as they beheld the dead bodies of their three comrades.

Further movement on their part was checked, for Balboaz at this instant jumped up from his recumbent position and shouted:

"Up, men, to the top of the cliff! Those two infernal scouts are there. Climb like squirrels, or your prey is gone!"

"Jerusalem! I jes' knowed it," muttered Sam, as he made a backward movement that nearly sent him to the bottom of the steep slope.

"Quick, Sam! there is no time to lose," came Richard Moore's low whisper.

A thick growth of bushes on top of the ridge had till now screened their bodies from view.

These same bushes now sheltered them as they turned to make a swift descent.

Unfortunately the noise of the rolling stones betrayed their presence. They heard eager shouts from the other side.

"They will see us if we go straight on," said Moore, taking a swift, but thoughtful, view of the situation. "There is a thicket to the right. Let us make for that."

They sped along the side of the steep hill, and soon reached the thicket indicated.

It proved to be a small but dense growth of cedar.

They had scarcely plunged into the grateful shade, rendered more dense by the coming on of darkness, than another shout of triumph told them that the enemy had reached the summit of the cliff.

This cry soon changed to one of rage when they could discern no trace of the fugitives.

"On!" cried Balboaz, who had scaled the cliff with the best of them. "On! They cannot have got out of sight in this time. They are hiding somewhere. Stay; a portion of you will take the left, another will go straight down, while I will lead the rest to the right. We shall not fail to catch them."

These orders were obeyed to the letter. Moore, looking back, saw Balboaz turn off directly toward him, followed by a third of his followers.

The bandit shrewdly guessed that the two scouts had taken refuge in the thicket.

Sam and the lieutenant pushed rapidly forward through the dense timber. The limbs, growing close together, formed a serious impediment; and while it effectually shielded them from view, blocked their own scope of vision forward and on either side.

They had gone probably three hundred yards when an opening disclosed itself through the foliage.

They pressed eagerly forward, thinking to find some outlet or mode of turning off their pursuers from the trail.

Their only hope was in front. Behind them they heard Balboaz and his men, scattered the whole width of the thicket and beating it as if for game.

But on entering the clearing, what was their surprise and probably despair to find it completely walled in by two towering cliffs, perpendicular as a house-side, and joining directly opposite in a sharp angle.

There appeared no outlet to the other side. They were in a natural *cul-de-sac*, to which the only entrance was through the thicket they had just traversed.

"Hebens! We am lost, shoah!" exclaimed Sam.

"Let us press on. The angle runs in some distance, and may afford us a hiding-place."

Close behind they heard the sound of voices and the noise of rustling limbs.

Quickly they explored the recess between the two cliffs. In vain! no opening disclosed itself.

CHAPTER XIII.

CORNERED.

RICHARD MOORE cast a last despairing look around the unlucky trap into which he had run.

It was a veritable pocket, built after the sublime architecture of nature.

On either hand the cliffs towered straight up, inaccessible even to the wild goat.

A small clear space occupied the angle formed by these cliffs running together. Further out the dense growth of cedar and other trees filled up the scope of vision.

Rugged masses of rock were scattered about the recess, behind which the two scouts might shelter themselves for a brief season.

At the extreme vertex of the angle, where the rugged face of the cliff opposed all further progress, a huge boulder had fallen, almost blocking up the recess, here not more than two yards across.

Behind this a small space was left, not more than sufficient for the bodies of the two friends.

In his rapid glance over the situation, Richard

Moore selected this point as the best possible for repelling the enemy, at least while his ammunition lasted.

He had determined to fight to the last extremity before putting himself a second time in the power of Balboaz.

"Here, Sam, is our post," he said, squeezing himself between the smooth face of the cliff and the boulder. "We must defend it to the death."

"De 'trenchments is excellent," answered Sam, "if only de ammunishun holds out."

"Or until they capture us by storm, which they will find some trouble in doing."

Thus the two brave men, with their backs planted to the smooth cliff behind them and their stern faces set toward the band of raiders, calmly awaited the struggle.

"If we only hadn't let our rifles!" said Sam.

"That was unfortunate. However, there's no use crying over spilt milk. We have still twelve shots apiece."

There was no time for further speech. Their pursuers had just emerged from the thicket and were looking around the cleared space with eager glances.

Balboaz perceived at once the nature of the locality, with which he was probably acquainted.

"We've got them, my men—caught like rats in a trap!" he exclaimed in a triumphant tone.

"Scatter at once, so as to take in the space between the cliffs; and let each man make that dark corner his goal."

This movement was immediately executed.

By this time darkness had fallen over the scene.

The two scouts, sheltered behind the broad boulder, were invisible save to one coming directly upon them.

The irregularities of the ground made the progress of these man-hunters slow.

In the disposition that had been made, it was a matter of course that the one in the center would soonest reach the narrow angle in which crouched the two friends.

This man happened to be a Mexican, and a trusted follower of Balboaz.

Cautiously he advanced in a stooping position, his steps becoming slower and slower as he advanced further into the dark recess of the mountain.

He reaches the boulder. Still no sign of the foe hidden behind it greets his senses.

Meantime his fate had been decided in a stealthily exchanged whisper between the two scouts.

The Mexican hesitates at the narrow entrance that leads to the rear of the thick boulder.

He listens intently.

Still he hears nothing.

With cautious step and a somewhat flickering courage he presses into the narrow passage.

He clutches a long hunting-knife in his right hand.

Another step will take him behind the boulder.

That step is his last.

A heavy thud, and without even a gasp, the Mexican falls with Sam's knife in his heart.

"Dat was a mean job," muttered Sam, as he withdrew his hunting-knife; "but it couldn't be helped."

"To rid the world of such fellows is a social kindness. If you do nothing worse, Sam, you're safe for 'kingdom come.'"

"But what's to be done wid de body?"

"Leave it lay. There is no room for it here."

"But der next one will stumble ober it, 'n' gib de alarm."

"We can prevent that."

"How?"

"One of us must stand at the entrance. That one shall be me, as it was my fault that we were run into this trap."

"No, sir; dat won't pass by a long sight! I se de eldest and strongest, an' dere's no settin' me in de background, like a four-year-old baby."

The lieutenant saw that Sam was immovable on this point.

"We'll compromise then," said he. "You take the top of the boulder—they cannot see you in the darkness—while I defend the entrance."

Sam readily agreed to this and the two at once took up their positions.

Just in time. Two other dark forms were seen cautiously advancing but a few feet away.

By lying flat on the level top of the boulder Sam concealed himself from view.

The lieutenant crouched behind the corner of the same barrier.

Both awaited their foes in silence.

Each one's attention being directed on his own victim he could not observe the movements of the other.

Both grasped their deadly hunting-knives, the chosen weapon so long as it was possible to preserve silence.

The bandit advancing from the left came stealthily along just beneath the upper edge of the boulder.

Once he glanced up. He saw nothing.

Had he repeated the glance a second after he would have seen a huge, brawny hand clutching the deadly knife poised for a strike.

He did not look.

The knife descended, urged by the powerful right arm of the negro scout, piercing the bandit's skull like thin paper.

He fell without a groan.

Faint as the noise was, the other bandit advancing from the right and who had not yet come within reach of Moore's arm, heard the fall. He glanced up just in time to dimly see a stout arm, clutching a knife, rise an instant and then disappear.

He sprang back as if from an electric shock, at the same time giving utterance to a loud cry.

"Back, Sam! We're in for it now!" cried the lieutenant.

Both sprang back to their former position behind the boulder. Once more, revolver in hand, side by side, with backs firmly pressed to the dark-gray rock behind them, they stood at bay driven to their last defense.

They had not long to wait.

The loud yell of the bandit drew the others rapidly around him.

He soon made known his discovery.

"At last we have them," exclaimed Balboaz.

"One united charge and they are ours."

The bandits glanced toward that dark corner hemmed in by rocks.

A profound silence now reigned therein.

The bandits little relished the task before them, though they were fifteen to two.

That mysterious silence was terrifying to their untutored minds.

"On!" cried Balboaz. "Why do you hesitate? Am I not leading you?"

He dashed forward. The band, put to shame by his courage followed on a swift run.

"Now for it!" whispered the lieutenant; "wait till their heads just loom above the boulder. Then make every shot count."

On they came. They are within two yards of the stone barrier.

Then rung out with startling rapidity a perfect fusillade of pistol-shots on the still night-air.

In less than a minute seven of the fifteen raiders lay prostrate with a pistol-bullet in the head.

Balboaz himself was wounded in the shoulder.

"On," he shouted, furious with rage. "Will you give up just as they have emptied their revolvers?"

The men recover their courage.

With a mad shout of revenge they rush upon the stone barrier. Some clamber over—some squeeze through the narrow passage between it and the cliff.

CHAPTER XIV.

MONTEZUMA AGAIN.

THE two scouts realized that there was desperate work before them.

As the remnant of Balboaz's followers swarmed over the rock boulder and through the narrow pass, they fired among them the few shot remaining in their revolvers.

Three more of the bandits fell.

Only five remained.

One of these was the leader Balboaz. He, accompanied by one other, just as the sharp crack of revolvers ceased, sprang over the dead bodies of their comrades and ran with uplifted knives upon the lieutenant.

So sudden was this onset that the brave soldier had not time to draw his own hunting-knife.

The impetus of the two men had hurled him backward against the rocky face of the cliff.

He was held pinioned in that narrow space, an empty revolver in his hand, while Balboaz's glittering blade and black eyes gleamed revengefully above him.

The other three, who had clambered across the boulder, and had escaped the fusillade of pistol-shots, had fallen upon Sam almost at the same instant.

The narrow space to which the struggle was confined prevented the latter from using his vast strength to the best advantage.

Besides, the three bandits had fallen upon him from above and their united weight coming so suddenly had forced the negro scout tightly against the rear face of the cliff.

Such was his position that he could neither afford aid to the lieutenant nor release himself.

The ready knives of the Mexicans already rose threateningly in the air.

Side by side and almost at the same moment the two friends were held at the mercy of their deadliest enemies.

Their fate would have been instant and sure and this chronicle have been brought to an untimely end, had not an extraordinary incident snatched our friends, as it were, right from the grasp of death.

The rock against which they were being pressed so tightly, all at once receded as if by magic, the lieutenant and Sam falling backward into what seemed to them Egyptian darkness.

Then it as instantly closed again.

For fully a minute the two scouts were so bewildered by this strange and seemingly mir-

aculous occurrence, that they lay motionless, and without attempting to rise.

Amid this confusion of thought they were dimly conscious of a third person falling—light footsteps—a blow—a stifled cry—all at one and the same moment.

They heard all this as in a dream—to be forgotten in the sense of their own wonderful deliverance. It seemed as if some supernatural power had all at once snatched them from their enemies' grasp, and transferred them to a different world and atmosphere.

Moore was the first to recover his power of voice and reflection.

"Sam!"

"Oh, Mars' Moore, am dat you?"

"I was just trying to settle that point, Sam; though it's the first time I ever doubted my being the son of my mother."

"Oh, sah! did dey really knife us, 'n' are we in—in—"

"In what, Sam?"

"You know de place."

"If you mean the lake of fire and brimstone, I should say no—the air is decidedly too pleasant."

"Den whar are we? an' how is we to get out?"

"That is a question we need not hurry to dispose of, since to all appearances we are much safer here than where we came from."

The two scouts had by this time risen to a standing position. The floor they had discovered to be of damp clay. By extending their hands they could feel the rugged wall of rock through which they had so magically fallen.

All was dark as Erebus around them.

For a moment—then a small, brilliant point of light appeared through the dense gloom, waving about like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"Hebbins! what am dat?" whispered Sam, his superstitious fears roused afresh.

"Perhaps the tutelary genius of the place," answered the lieutenant. "We shall soon see, for it is rapidly approaching us."

In fact, the bright, wavering point of light soon developed into the tall form of a man carrying a lighted torch.

The flickering rays illumined but a small portion of the gloomy cavern, only sufficient to render more vast and solemn the dark-gray rocks, the lofty ceiling, the columnar masses of stalactites, the dark openings fading into shadowy distances.

In the center of the circle of light strode the form of the man. As he advanced into plainer view the lieutenant cried out:

"It is the Indian, Sam. The man we rescued."

"And who has been fortunate enough to return the favor," responded the other in surprisingly good English.

The two voices sounded strangely hollow, reverberating from the cavern walls.

"How so? You were not here," said Moore in reply to the Indian's remark.

"I have only been away a few moments to dispose of an unlucky Mexican who tumbled in with you."

"Ha! that accounts for the strange noises we heard. You killed him?"

"Yes, it was the safest."

The Indian, Montezuma, holding the lighted torch above his head contemplated the two men earnestly.

"Which of you made the great shot that released me?" he at length asked.

"I suppose that honor belongs to me," answered Moore.

He contemplated admiringly the bright-bued features of the Indian, which wore a dignity so becoming his race.

"At first I thought it was the Sun-God," said Montezuma, "who had deigned to protect me so wonderfully. But when I looked back from the summit of a cliff, I beheld two men pursued by the cattle thieves. Then I knew who were my preservers."

"True! I was lucky enough to cut the rope with a bullet, but it was your own activity and courage that finished the work," said Moore.

A glance of fierce pride kindled up the eyes of the Indian, while he glanced approvingly at the bloody dagger hanging to his girdle.

"So may all perish who lay a finger on the last of the Montezumas—the accursed race! thieves—assassins—Spaniards!"

"You owe them no favors, that is certain—"

"And they shall obtain none."

"But the scene I interrupted—the torture—"

"Was to wrest from me a secret. That accursed demon, Balboaz, has in some way discovered that I alone know the whereabouts of the immense treasure that was carried out of Mexico on its capture by the Spaniards."

The lieutenant smiled incredulously. Yet the dignified bearing and sincere tone of the speaker perplexed him.

"I have heard something of that legend," he said; "but always looked upon it as the height of romance. Had such a treasure been preserved, the secret could not have been carried undetected through all these years."

"Yet it could and has been so kept," asserted the Indian, solemnly. "Do you disbelieve me? I talk not with a crooked tongue."

"I do not doubt your word; but I doubt your judgment—your sanity. You may be under some illusion."

"What! an illusion, when I have seen it with my own eyes—touched it with my own hands! I hope to prove your mistake some time in the future."

"Until then let us drop the subject," said the lieutenant. "I have something on hand of far more importance than all the wealth of the Incas. Do you know of a young white maiden—a captive to this Balboaz?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE NATURAL TUNNEL.

THE Indian was about to answer him when an exclamation from Sam interrupted him.

The latter had been examining, by the aid of the flickering torchlight, the dark-gray wall of rock through which himself and the lieutenant had made so strange an entrance into this underground world.

At a point directly opposite the place where they had first fallen, a large rock projected from the face of the wall, the summit flat, tapering downward till it terminated in a rounded shape at the bottom.

This curved and rounded base could hardly have maintained the singularly-shaped rock in its perpendicular position had it not been for the hollow, cradle-like basin in which it rested, and which seemed fitted by nature for its reception.

What had caused Sam's exclamation of wonder was this:

When, in examining the curious mass of stone, he had happened to press lightly against one end, it had moved beneath the touch, and a draught of cool night air had blown in upon his cheek.

The pressure removed, the stone instantly resumed its position, and to all appearances was as firmly fixed on its foundation as the massive wall of which it seemed a part.

"I swar to grashus, Mars' Moore, jes' look here!"

"What is it, Sam?"

"Dis rock moves if yer touches it."

"Impossible! Why it's half as big as a house."

"No matter. I tell yer it do move. Try it for yerself."

Moore smiled at what he thought an illusion on Sam's part.

However, he was about to advance to try the experiment of moving the immense stone, when the Indian laying his hand lightly on his arm, detained him.

"Do not attempt it," he said warningly.

"Your enemies may still be on the outside."

The lieutenant looked up wondering.

"Our enemies—outside! But what has moving that stone to do with them?"

"Much. The same opening that admitted you might also admit them."

"Ah! I begin to see," said the lieutenant.

"We owe our escape not to a miracle, but to a rare freak of nature. This must be one of those wonderful rocking-stones of which some five or six only are known, scattered about the world."

"Such may be the name in your tongue," said the Indian. "Among us it is called the cradle of the Sun-God when He was first born among men."

"So this stone completely blocks up the opening through which we came?"

"Completely."

"But why can't dey open it from de outside as well as we from de inside?" put in Sam.

"Because it can only be pushed in a particular direction. A hundred men could not move it pressing from without."

"Then you it was that opened the way for us so opportunely. You more than canceled the slight debt you contracted earlier in the evening."

"Not so," answered Montezuma, earnestly.

"For releasing me from that man's torture I would willingly devote a lifetime's service."

"I should be a selfish fool to accept such gratitude. If you only aid us in rescuing the captive I spoke of from Balboaz's hands, we shall be indeed paid a hundred times over."

"The captive! a white maiden?"

"Yes. Do you know of her whereabouts?"

"I saw her in the captain's tent behind the grove."

"The grove in which they put you to the torture?"

"Yes."

"That accounts for our not seeing it. She was not alone?" he added, anxiously.

"No. An old squaw remains with her as a guard."

Richard Moore remained silent a moment.

"An idea strikes me," he observed suddenly.

"How long do you think we have been in this cavern?"

"Not ober thirty minits," said Sam.

The Indian shook his head emphatically.

"Not longer than you could count two hundred," he said.

Moore laughed.

"Your wonderful escape has destroyed your reckoning, Sam," said he, consulting his watch

by the torchlight. "The Indian is right. What seemed to us a half-hour has really been but five minutes."

"Yer don't say!" quoth the astonished negro.

"I was going to remark," resumed the lieutenant, "that it is just possible for us to reach the raiders' camp in advance of the raiders themselves. Then all that is needed is a sudden assault on the white tent—overpower the guard, if there is any—and bear the captive off in safety."

"Hurrah!" shouted Sam, "dat am de program' to de letta."

"There is but one thing in the way. How are we to get out of here save by the way we came? Is there any other entrance?" he asked, turning to the Indian.

"There is, else I should not have been here to move that stone."

"How far from here?"

"About half a mile."

"Then this is a veritable natural tunnel?"

"You can call it such, though there are caverns branching off, and deep, bottomless abysses."

"And is it known only to yourself?"

"I know of no one else who possesses the secret. It was a refuge for our forefathers from the cruel Spaniards, and has been carefully concealed."

"Then your kindness is all the greater for revealing it to us. But how did you come to know our peril?"

"By hearing the report of firearms without. I judged of your position against the rock by the same means."

The three men were now traversing the tunnel.

At every step new underground wonders met their gaze.

The floor was remarkably even and showed traces of having been leveled by the hand of man.

The Indian led, holding aloft the torch. Otherwise it might frequently have puzzled the two scouts which of the passages, branching off in various directions, to select.

The lieutenant and Sam spoke little during the passage through the winding cavities of the mountain, so absorbed were they in the many beautiful formations, glittering in every imaginable shape and color around them.

Sometimes the arched ceiling towered far above their heads, beyond the feeble rays of the torchlight; then it descended so low as to compel the three underground wanderers to bend almost double. At intervals, sparkling fountains were seen, clear as crystal, filling white, marble-like basins to the very brim.

The light flashed into the clear water was reflected in coruscations of every color, and of fascinating brilliancy.

The two scouts halted a moment to drink from one of these attractive fountains. The water, cold as ice and delightfully limpid, seemed to the thirsty men like the nectar of the gods.

"Dis am jis' glorious," said Sam, wiping his lips after a copious draught.

"Better than mint julep, eh, Sam?" laughed Moore.

This happened to be a beverage of which Sam was particularly fond.

"We must hurry on," said the lieutenant, "there's no time for dallying," and he hastened forward.

The Indian had been patiently waiting during the brief halt.

Richard Moore, in his haste to rescue the captive girl, passed the Indian and was hurrying on before.

"Stop!" cried Montezuma, "not that way!—you will walk into the Demon's Chasm!"

He was cut short by a loud cry from the lieutenant.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DEMON'S CHASM.

ON hearing the startling cry from the lieutenant Sam and the Indian ran forward.

They advanced only a few yards in that direction when the torch held by Montezuma disclosed a yawning gulf of darkness.

It opened beneath the feet of the two men and gave no warning of its existence until fairly on the edge.

One glance into its impenetrable depths was sufficient to thrill the stoutest heart with a vague terror.

"Hebensi! if Mars' Moore hab fallen in dar!" exclaimed the negro in accents of intense grief.

"He will never come out alive," said the Indian.

"Help!"

The faint call issued from the dark abyss and startled the two men. The words echoed hollowly but distinctly on their ears.

"De saints be praised!" exclaimed Sam joyfully. "He am libin', shoah!"

The Indian made no response, but kneeling down on the very edge, held the lighted torch as far down as he could reach with his extended arm.

There, only a dozen feet below, hung the lieut-

enant on a sharp projection of the rocky wall of the chasm.

By a fortunate accident his strong, deerskin tunic, being unbuttoned at the time, had become entangled in falling, and thus held him secure from what would have been inevitable destruction.

Montezuma called down to him:

"Are you hurt, senior?"

"No," came the faint response, "only this hanging head downward is not very agreeable."

"Can you catch hold anywhere with your hands?"

"No, the wall is too smooth."

"Hold on awhile longer. We shall have you up."

He turned to Sam who had also been looking downward on the dangerous position of his friend.

"We must make a rope," he said.

"How?" asked Sam, looking round upon the massive rocks as if they could furnish the required article.

"You have the belt about your waist—your coat, and this," concluded the Indian, detaching the strong girdle of buffalo-hide from his own body, "should make one of the required length."

They at once set to work, and in a short time had united the three articles into a strong if not very symmetrical rope.

This was dropped over the edge of the chasm.

Montezuma anxiously watched its descent.

It fell short by just a foot of the suspended form of the lieutenant.

"De debbil am in it all," exclaimed Sam angrily.

"We can still remedy the shortness of the rope," said Montezuma, calmly.

"How?"

"One of us must descend."

"I'll do it in a second," cried Sam; "but can you hold me?"

The Indian smiled as he surveyed the massive, compact frame of the negro scout.

"I might—but I fear the rope would not."

"Then you must try it."

"Good. It will be decidedly the best as I am but half your weight."

One end of the roughly-made rope was then tied beneath the Indian's arms.

Sam took a good hold upon the other end while the Indian lowered himself into the frightful chasm.

The torch had been stuck into a niche of the rocks directly beneath the edge, thus throwing a dim light upon the form of the lieutenant below.

The Indian is carefully lowered by the aid of Sam's immense strength. His feet touch the projecting stone to which Moore hangs head downward.

He rapidly unties the rope from his own person; then, holding on with one hand, with the other he reaches down and takes a firm grip upon Moore's coat-collar.

Then might be seen the great power concentrated in the slender limbs of Montezuma.

With scarcely an apparent effort he raised the lieutenant to an erect position upon the narrow rock.

He held him carefully while he secured the rope around him beneath the arms.

Moore had become unconscious before the Indian reached him, and now hung a dead weight upon his arms.

As Montezuma finished tying the rope about him, he recovered his senses, and gazed about wonderingly.

"Where am I?"—then he recollected himself and added:

"Ah, I remember—the fall! And have you really risked your life to save me?" he asked of the Indian.

"There was little risk," responded Montezuma. "Your friend's stout arms held me as safe as on solid ground."

The Indian called to Sam to "pull away" and the lieutenant was soon hoisted in safety to the cave above.

Sam, in his haste to lower the rope for the Indian, forgot to be cautious, and, by an unlucky movement, the rope struck the torch from the niche in which it had been placed.

It fell, shooting downward like a falling meteor into the fathomless gulf; and, in an instant, the three friends were enveloped in darkness worse than that of Egypt.

"Great Jerusalem! what have I done!" exclaimed Sam, in despair.

"Don't be alarmed," cried the Indian from below. "You still have the rope. Lower at the same place as near as you can."

Sam did as directed, though in momentary fear of tumbling over in the darkness.

"Have you got it?" he cried.

A moment's pause—then came the answer in the affirmative.

"Shall I haul away?"

"Yes."

Sam pulled away at the rope. The Indian soon reached the edge, and a vigorous spring landed him in safety.

"Tank heben! we're all safe at last," said Sam.

"Safe out of that pit of darkness," said Moore. "But how are we to find our way out without a light?"

"Or keep from falling down anudder hole," said Sam.

"Be careful to follow right in my footsteps," said the Indian, "and you shall reach the outer world in safety. These caverns are as familiar to me as a forest path."

"For better security, it would be a good idea to hold to each other," said Moore; "then there will be no danger of straying."

Montezuma assented to this, and taking the lead, the two scouts followed at his heels, each keeping a hand upon the shoulder of the one preceding.

In this way, through blackest darkness, they traversed in safety the rest of the natural tunnel.

They found the entrance at this end as cleverly contrived as that at the other—only this was the work of art, that of nature.

A square stone wicket had been set in the thick rock that corresponded so exactly with the rough wall around as to baffle all but the keenest observer to detect its existence.

Montezuma, by operating some hidden but powerful spring, caused the heavy stone to glide noiselessly aside, disclosing a square opening through which shone the bright moonlight.

Through this opening the three men crawled into the open air, with a sigh of relief that the dangerous passage was over.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BOLD RESCUE.

AS the three emerged from the gloomy cavern, Richard Moore could scarce restrain a slight cry of astonishment.

The moon had risen, and by its pale light he commanded at one view the rugged sides of the mountain, near whose summit he stood, and further down, and only a few hundred yards to the north, the small, green vale, with its clear, silvery stream rippling along under the mild radiance of the moon.

Peacefully it flowed between the green meadow-lands on either side, as though the deadliest foes of honest men's happiness had not made its banks their resting-place, and drank of its silvery waters.

But, for the time being, no crime-stained brigand polluted this charming temple of nature by his presence.

Balboaz, in his eagerness to capture the two scouts, had not left one behind.

The horses were left free to scour the beautiful valley at their own wild will.

Only, near the small grove on the eastern side, a single man—an Indian—already bowed with years, stood like a statue before the closed entrance of a tent.

The tent was small, and the canvas shone white as snow in the moonlight.

It was this object that attracted the eyes of our three adventurers as if possessed of magnetic powers.

"There, sure enough, is the tent!" exclaimed Moore joyfully. "Who could have believed that our underground wanderings could lead to this point?"

"I don't see a sign ob dem rascally Greasers," said Sam.

"Oh, if they but stay another fifteen minutes," said the lieutenant, earnestly.

"You are certain the white maiden is in yonder tent?" he added, addressing Montezuma.

"I saw her with my own eyes."

"That is sufficient. Now for action swift and sure. Time enough has been lost."

The three men exchanged no further words. Their energies were concentrated on descending the mountain in the shortest possible space of time.

The Indian still took the lead and showed his perfect familiarity with the winding path by darting around lofty boulders, through narrow passes, and over deep gullies worn in the mountain side at a pace that called forth the utmost activity of his two followers.

In this way they reached the little valley in an incredibly short time.

They did not go straight forward to reach the little tent, but took an indirect course, skirting the base of the cliffs and putting the grove between them and any interested observer about the tent.

They stole, silent as specters, through the little clump of trees and came out in the rear of the tent, without having raised the slightest alarm.

"One of us must find out whether or no a guard has been stationed," whispered the lieutenant.

"That duty falls to me," said the Indian.

Without a word he cautiously slipped around the tent, his moccasined feet leaving no impress on the green turf.

He as cautiously slipped back again.

"There is one man—an Indian," he whispered. "Leave him to me. When you hear the fall of a body then instantly make an opening here in the rear. We shall then take the squaw inside by surprise."

Meantime, the Indian on guard, his gray scalp lock waving in the night breeze, stood

gazing on the placid stream before him, all unconscious of the impending doom.

He sees not the tall, slender form of Montezuma gliding stealthily around the white canvas wall—he sees not the deadly knife grasped in the strong, nervous fingers.

Once he hears a faint footfall and is turning his head.

But, with the spring of a tiger, Montezuma is upon him. The deadly knife sinks into the Indian's body.

The blow is mortal and the dusky form sinks to the ground, a slight gasp being the only sound accompanying the dread summons.

Sam and the lieutenant hear the slight noise of the Indian guard's fall, and the latter at once rips open the thin canvas.

Through this opening they enter the inclosure at the same instant that Montezuma springs in by the first entrance.

The noise thus created, slight though it was, aroused an old Indian crone who had been sleeping on a pile of skins in one corner.

At sight of the three strange men, one white, one black, and one of her own coppery complexion, she gave a scream that might have been heard the whole length of the little valley.

"Great Jerusalem!" cried Sam, springing forward. "She will hab the whole gang on us in a few minits!"

He clapped one of his huge hands over the Indian hag's mouth, effectually stopping her noise.

The other two hastened to his assistance, and in a few moments the ancient crone lay gagged and bound.

They had now time to turn their attention to the remaining occupant of the tent.

The tumult occasioned by this sudden invasion had by no means been unnoticed in that quarter.

A young maiden just quitting her teens had sprung up from the iron camp-bed at the opposite side of the tent on the first entrance of our three friends.

Their strange and sudden attack at first utterly bewildered her.

Terror took possession of her heart at sight of the negro and Montezuma.

But a second glance revealed to her Richard Moore's manly form, and the sight of a face evidently American roused a vague hope in her heart.

She had been taking but a temporary nap, and rose fully dressed from the narrow camp-bed.

After disposing of the old squaw, Richard Moore turned to the maiden, and said as he respectfully doffed his fur cap:

"I trust we have not disturbed you overmuch. We have come to save you."

The gentle yet manly tone of the speaker completely dissipated the young girl's fears.

His voice sounded strangely familiar, and taking courage, she glanced more closely at the young soldier's features.

She saw a pale, clear-cut visage, dark, silky hair and mustache, and dark-gray eyes that shone with singular resolution, yet gentleness.

Richard Moore met the glance and his heart thrilled with a new, strange emotion as he observed the lovely features and form of his old-time playmate.

The spirited, graceful, blue-eyed girl had developed into a woman, possessing remarkable personal attractions.

"Birdie!" The old familiar name fell involuntarily from Moore's lips as he met the maiden's glance.

The latter no longer doubted.

"It is Richard! Oh, thank Heaven!" she exclaimed in the depths of her gratitude.

"Oh, Richard! save me from that demon's power! Do this—and no favor on earth can recompense you."

The sudden relief from the depths of despair overcame the girl, and clasping her hands to her face, she burst into tears; but they were tears of joy.

"It's high time we be goin'," broke in Sam, whom too much sentiment made restless.

"True; the joy of this meeting has made me forget our danger," said the lieutenant.

He forthwith tenderly lifted Birdie Lester in his arms and hastened rapidly through the opening in the rear.

Sam and the Indian followed.

They had just reached the little grove when the sound of distant voices told them the cattle-raiders were returning.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BAFLED BANDIT.

IT is now time that we return to Balboaz and his small remnant of followers, whom we left before the secret entrance of the natural tunnel.

The wonderful phenomenon of the rocky face of the cliff opening to receive the two hard-pressed scouts and then instantly closing again caused even the cunning bandit to stand for a moment half stunned, amazed—what the French call *atterre*—earth-glued.

As the reader will remember, one of the Mexicans had fallen along with Sam into the strange cavern.

The remaining three, more fortunate, after beholding what they devoutly believed to be a miracle, gave one howl of superstitious terror; and turning, scrambled back at full speed over the huge boulder.

As with nearly all half-savage, ignorant people, the strange, the unknown, had for them a certain terrible import as being the manifestation of a power infinitely superior to the feeble will of man.

Hence the scene of this strange incident was ever afterward shunned by the band of raiders as being consecrated by a Presence hostile to themselves.

It was otherwise with Balboaz.

His keener intelligence would not allow that anything superhuman had to do with the occurrence so long as a natural solution was possible.

Having recovered from the first shock of amazement, he called upon his subordinates to turn and assist him in ferreting out the mystery.

In vain. No inducement could prevail upon them to pass behind the boulder a second time.

He became angry. He commanded instant obedience or they should receive punishment as traitors.

"It's useless, cap'n," responded one. "The place is haunted. It's death to any one to fool around that spot. I, for one, would rather die like a human being, than be whisked through a cliff by ghosts, like poor Sancho."

The others mutely echoed this opinion.

The captain swore in good round Spanish.

Balboaz had good reason to be out of sorts with him self and all around him.

Of the fifteen men he had led against the two scouts only four were left, including himself.

Ten had fallen victims to the deadly weapons of the army scouts. One had fallen through the mysterious opening in the cliff.

Balboaz himself had received a pistol-wound in the shoulder which was beginning to smart painfully.

And after all, just as the victims were seemingly in his grasp, they had been snatched from him, as it were, miraculously.

When he found that his men were past listening to words of his, he himself examined by feeling in the dense darkness the stone face of the cliff.

He beat against it with his hands—he pushed with all his force, which was somewhat considerable.

He might really have been pushing against the side of a precipice for all the impression he made.

Not a tremor could he produce in the mysterious rock.

He finally gave up in despair.

"One of you must stand sentinel here," he said when he came forth. "There is a passage through that rock. I shall credit my own eyes in spite of all the witchcraft in existence."

The men responded not to the commission that was required of them.

Their glances, furtively exchanged, plainly told Balboaz that it would be vain to expect any one of the four to remain alone within sight of the mysterious passage.

Their leader tried another plan.

"Since neither of you have the courage to try it alone I shall leave two. You, Juan and Gomez watch this cavern wall. Hide yourselves behind the rocks, and the first one that comes forth, shoot him dead. Should it prove to be the American officer, you may expect a thousand pesos to divide between you."

It was this last promise that decided the bandits; the two men named at once stepped forth and secured suitable posts for watching the nook between the cliffs.

This point settled to his satisfaction, Balboaz, accompanied by the remaining Mexican, retraced his steps through the thicket of cedar.

The passage occupied some considerable time on account of the darkness and the interlacing branches, under which they were compelled to creep.

When they at last issued upon the open part of the steep ridge, they were just in time to see the other two divisions of the band meet each other in the road below.

Balboaz and his companion hastily descended to inquire the result of their search, though, of course, he knew it had been unsuccessful, so far as the two scouts were concerned.

To his questions, he learned from the leader of the band that had made a direct descent of the mountains, that two handsome steeds, ready saddled as if for a journey, had been found tethered in a deep, secluded ravine beneath some magnolia trees.

The bandit leader could scarce restrain his joy at this information.

"They are theirs," he exclaimed, "and their rifles—did you see them?"

"No."

"They were doubtless hidden in some hollow log. You left everything undisturbed?"

"Didn't touch a thing."

"Did you leave a trail to show that some one had been there?"

"I thought of that very thing, cap'n, and was careful as near as I could, not to leave a trace of one."

"You did right. You have more foresight than I gave you credit for. To prove my confidence I shall make you leader of the expedition I have planned."

Pausing a moment Balboaz continued:

"You will take this same party and return to the ravine in which you found the horses. Be careful that no trace of your movements be left on the way. Place yourselves in ambush and when these two men show up for their horses, don't give them a moment's notice, but fire into them on the spot. The American is a tricky scoundrel and will slip through your fingers on the slightest chance."

"He will make his last slip," said the Mexican, with a grim attempt at jesting, "if he shows up within reach of our rifles. He will slip into his grave."

The party of some fifteen men then turned to retrace its steps down the steep mountain side.

This movement had scarcely been made when a wild shriek was heard, coming from the little vale in which the raiders had encamped.

"Carambo!" exclaimed Balboaz, "something has happened in the camp! I remember now, I forgot to leave a guard. Curse it if anything should befall the Senora Lester!"

Full of vague anxieties he called to the remainder of the band to follow him, and hastened rapidly around the ridge into the little valley.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PURSUIT.

THE voices and the tramp of many men that heralded the return of Balboaz and his train of followers were borne with ominous sound to the ears of Richard Moore and his lovely burden.

Had he been freed from that dainty burden with only himself to care for, not the faintest tremor would have stirred the brave lieutenant's heart at the near approach of his enemies.

Now, the situation was quite different.

The presence of his beautiful charge would be a serious drag in case of a rapid pursuit; and, should they be forced to turn at bay, as had actually happened only an hour before, would scarcely fail being attended with the most serious consequences.

These thoughts flashed through Richard Moore's mind, and probably something of his anxiety was depicted in his features, for the girl, so lightly borne in his strong arms suddenly observed:

"Richard, you have formed a strangely low opinion of me."

Richard's amazement at this remarkable assertion for an instant impeded his reply. Then he stammered forth:

"How! a low opinion of you? What unfortunate conduct of mine has put that notion into your head?"

"I mean as to my physical powers," continued Birdie. "You have forgotten that I am a plain country girl. I am used to running over hills and plains and driving the wild horses and cattle like any cowboy. Here you have come and picked me up as daintily as though I were one of those city dolls who spend half their time in a rocking-chair, and the other half in sleep; and who grow short-winded walking round a square."

The lieutenant laughed. It was evident this information by no means lowered the fair girl in his estimation.

He at once released her, though somewhat reluctantly we must confess, and as they ran along side by side he said:

"I must acknowledge my mistake. I did not know into what a paragon you had grown. But here we are at the foot of the pass that leads up into the mountain. This, I fear, will test all your agility, Miss Lester."

They had, in fact, just reached the end of the little valley, and arrived at the entrance to the same path down which the three men had descended a few minutes before.

The Indian and Sam had followed close behind, acting as a rear guard to our hero and his fair charge.

And at this moment a cry of rage from the little tent told them that Balboaz had reached the scene of their late exploit and discovered his loss.

Now, indeed, they realized that no time was to be lost.

Already mingled shouts and commands from the rear announced that a pursuit was being organized.

At this critical juncture an unfortunate incident occurred.

In reply to Moore's last remark, Birdie Lester sprung up the narrow, rugged pass with the agility and grace of an antelope, and reaching a jutting point of rock, turned and sent back a ringing peal of silvery laughter.

It was a mere impulse of the moment; but trifling as it was that peal of laughter brought

our friends face to face with their peril, for an answering shout of triumph from the band of raiders told them it had been heard by their pursuers.

"Maledictions on the girl!" exclaimed Montezuma; "they have discovered us."

"Jerusalem! what am we to do now?" said Sam.

The lieutenant was silent.

"Follow me to the secret cave!" cried the Indian, darting past. "Run as if you had wings; run for your lives!"

He at once took the lead.

As he ran past the mortified girl, who too late had realized her mistake, he said in quick accents:

"Watch my steps, and follow me as closely as possible. I will lead you to safety."

Without a word the young girl turned, and with compressed lips and flashing eyes bent all her energies upon the swift tortuous flight up the steep mountain-side.

It was indeed a task for that slender yet graceful form.

Yet, though the agile figure of the Indian seemed almost to fly up the steep ascents, around rugged bowlders, over the narrow gullies, along a route impassable almost save to the practiced mountaineer, the slight maiden of only nineteen kept at his heels with the pertinacity of a greyhound.

She was determined to redeem the error that had nearly proved fatal to the little party.

Close in her rear came the lieutenant, who could scarce take heed to his own steps from watching the fascinating form that bounded on before him.

Lastly came Sam, blowing and puffing like a huge porpoise.

In this way they accomplished the steep ascent in a marvelously short time.

At last they stood near the secret entrance of the natural tunnel.

They paused panting, and looked back down the rugged mountain-side.

The moon shone brightly in the west; but the forms of the pursuing raiders were concealed from view by intervening rocks and the windings of the mountain path.

But their harsh exclamations and rude curses were plainly heard.

"In for your lives before they catch sight of you," whispered the Indian, who had slipped back the hidden door in the cliff.

The maiden uttered a slight exclamation as she saw the opening thus suddenly disclosed in the seemingly solid rock.

But remembering her former error, she repressed her astonishment, and hastily darted beneath the overhanging ledge into the secret tunnel.

The others followed, Montezuma being the last to leave the open air.

He slid the stone barrier back into its place.

It was then secured in such a manner that nothing but powder and fuse could stir it from the outside.

Our friends were in darkness—and safety.

"Hist!" said the Indian in a sharp whisper, as Birdie was about to speak; "they will be here in another moment. Do not speak above a whisper. A very slight noise will penetrate the rock, and disclose our whereabouts."

After this caution all preserved a dead silence.

The voices of their enemies were soon heard without.

Cries of astonishment and disappointment were exchanged among the Indians and outlaws.

The voice of Balboaz rose above the rest in a high treble.

"Carambo!" he cried, "are these demons forever to escape me? Speak up! who saw them last?"

"Just below there I saw the flutter of the white squaw's dress, as I was turning a rock," said one keen-eyed Apache.

"Did you see no one else?"

"No. Another rock hid them from me."

The point indicated by the Indian was a ledge just below the entrance to the tunnel.

Balboaz glanced up to the summit of the ridge.

"Had they passed beyond this point," he said, "they would certainly have been seen. The slope is even and straight."

He bent his head in perplexed thought.

At length he looked up—a demoniac gleam in his tiger-like eyes.

"I have it," he said. "These same two men escaped me in precisely the same manner, only an hour ago, on the other side of this ridge. Before we could return they were in our camp, and stole my prize, Senora Lester. They flee, and just at this spot they again disappear; what is the inference?"

Silence fell among those rough men as they listened to the shrewd reasoning of their leader.

It was by just such displays of superior intelligence that Balboaz maintained a despotic rule over their rude, untutored minds.

A moment's pause—then the bandit leader exclaimed, triumphantly:

"This is the conclusion, and the only one: there exists a secret passage through the mountain."

CHAPTER XX.

TRAPPED AGAIN.

EVERY word spoken by Balboaz to his men was plainly heard by the four fugitives in the secret cave.

His final decision, "There exists a passage through the mountain," fell upon their ears like an ominous prophecy.

They had fancied themselves secure—when lo! the great secret on which they had based their hopes of safety was in the hands of their treacherous persecutor.

One slender thread of hope remained.

He might not be able to find the hidden entrance.

It soon became clear that he would relax no effort in that direction.

They heard the command given to search followed by the confused trampling of footsteps among the scattered rocks and crevices of the mountain-side.

The fair girl almost trembled at the prospect of discovery and recapture. Every approaching footfall found an answering echo of dread in her heart.

Her three male protectors awaited the result in anxious but silent expectation.

Once or twice they heard some one come directly beneath the ledge under which the stone door was cleverly concealed.

In each case the steps receded without announcing a discovery.

The night was in their favor in spite of the bright moonlight, which could not dissipate the dense shadows lurking in the many crevices of the rocks.

Probably half an hour thus passed away in agonizing suspense to the little party.

Then for a third time they hear footsteps—this time the moccasined tread of an Indian—approach dangerously close to the hidden portal.

Suddenly the voice of Balboaz breaks in once more:

"You have hunted long enough for to-night. We will return and resume the search by daylight. Four of you will remain as a guard, to see that the foxes do not leave their burrow."

The spirits of the four hunted fugitives rose immensely.

A whole night was a respite during which much might be accomplished by three resolute men.

How fleeting the deceptive hope!

Scarcely had the last words of Balboaz died away, than a sharp cry of triumph sounded without, almost at their ears.

The cry came from the Indian who had crept within the sheltered entrance. The words were Spanish, and meant:

"I have found it."

Montezuma could scarcely control himself at these ominous words. They could not see his features, but the two scouts could hear his strong teeth grind together in his intense chagrin at finding his long-kept secret discovered.

The lieutenant wondered how the stone wicket, so nicely joined were the edges of the surrounding rock, could have been discovered in that shadowy recess where no ray of moonlight could penetrate.

His curiosity was soon allayed.

The Indian's cry at once brought around him the rest of the raiders, with their chief.

The latter hastily struck a light with some flint and powder, and in answer to his look of inquiry the Indian pointed to a small shred of thin muslin, which projected from the rough surface of the stone.

"Carambo!" exclaimed Balboaz, overjoyed at the sight. "My fair captive is certainly befriending us to-night. First a merry peal of laughter tells her whereabouts, and now a shred of her dress has disclosed to us the entrance to the secret passage."

The reader may imagine the hapless girl's feelings on hearing this new misfortune. It appeared as if she were destined to bring destruction upon herself and her brave defenders.

The disappointment of the three men was equally painful, though from a different source.

Still the little party preserved a strict silence, not venturing even on a whisper.

Balboaz, immediately on the Indian's discovery, sent one of his men back to camp to procure a drill, powder and fuse.

His purpose was to blow open by blasting the entrance to the natural tunnel.

"We have no time to lose," whispered the Indian when he became assured that such was the bandit's design. "We must make our way to the opposite end of the tunnel. Another half-hour and this cavern will be overrun by those rascally raiders."

The tone in which he spoke these words showed how painfully the occurrence affected him.

The little party had advanced some yards away from the entrance, and Montezuma now ventured upon lighting a torch, a store of which he had provided in one of the many crevices.

He then took the lead, and once more the devious passage, half a mile long, was commenced.

In spite of the many dangers by which they

were surrounded, Richard Moore and his fair companion could not help admiring the numerous and beautiful curiosities that attracted them on every hand.

To Birdie Lester it seemed as though she were wandering through some new and wonderful world—a lonely world, sacred only to the Gods of Silence—and whose ghostly inhabitants had long since departed.

Hand in hand the tall, handsome soldier and the graceful maiden traversed the wonderful tunnel at the heels of the strange guide, Montezuma.

Suddenly Montezuma halts when about half-way and points down to the spot they have just crossed between two lofty and precipitous walls.

"You would not think that to be other than solid ground?" he said.

"No," answered all three.

"You will give a different answer if you examine closely. It is a bridge of boards slightly covered with clay, stamped down and hardened."

"How far does it extend?" asked Moore.

"About twelve paces. But, in fact, the bridge is double."

"Double!"

"Yes, as I will show you in a moment."

Montezuma handed the torch to the lieutenant and then simply pushed aside a heavy stone that lay against the base of the wall at one end of the bridge.

Scarcely was the rock removed when a portion of the narrow floor some twenty feet in length slowly rose till it assumed a perpendicular position against the side of the cavern.

There it could scarcely be distinguished from the rest of the wall.

But, strange to say, the narrow passage seemed in no wise altered. A second floor stood in room of the first, and precisely similar in appearance.

The lieutenant, Birdie and Sam watched this strange phenomenon with amazement.

"What is the meaning of all that?" asked the lieutenant of Montezuma.

"It means," said the Indian with a curious smile, "that were we to step upon that bridge as it now appears, it would break like pasteboard and hurl us to the bottom of a chasm hundreds of feet in depth."

"A wonderful trap!" was the comment of the soldier. "But surely you will not leave it in this shape?"

"Why not?" asked the Indian, sternly. "Is not Balboaz and his fiends behind us? Are they not hunting us down like wild beasts?"

No reply was offered to this. Only the lieutenant turned away with a shudder and gave the order to proceed.

The remainder of the journey was accomplished in a few minutes.

When they reached the wonderful rocking-stone, Montezuma said:

"Balboaz has probably left a guard at this end. Remain quiet a few moments while I see if the coast is clear."

With the words, he gently pushed the rocking-stone just sufficient to allow his passage.

Stealthily creeping forth, he allowed it to close behind him.

A few minutes of suspense followed to the three left within. Then the sharp crack of a rifle broke the silence.

CHAPTER XXI.

OUT OF THE TRAP.

IT was a moment of terrible suspense to those three waiting in the shelter of the gloomy cavern after the sharp report of the rifle sounded on the still night-air.

Richard Moore could scarcely restrain himself from pushing aside the stone barrier and rushing forth to the aid of his strange friend, the Indian. He knew the latter carried no rifle, and hence the shot, from whatever source, must have been directed against him. Short as their acquaintance had been, a strong attachment had sprung up between the lieutenant and Montezuma.

The mystery that surrounded the latter, his claim of descent from the royal race of the Aztecs, not more than his wonderful strength and agility had drawn toward him both the esteem and respect of the American.

Hence the fancy that the shot he had heard had proved fatal to his Indian friend filled him with sudden grief and remorse—remorse that all this danger had been encountered in serving him and those dearest to him. His fears were soon put to rest by the sudden movement of the rocking-stone and the appearance of Montezuma unhurt.

The sudden rebound from grief and anxious suspense was almost painful.

"Thank Heaven, you were not hurt, my friend!" exclaimed the lieutenant, impulsively. "We were in torture after hearing that report."

The others re-echoed his joy as earnestly.

It was delightful to see the flush of pleasure that lit up the features of Montezuma on hearing these tokens of esteem from his new friends.

He who could be fierce and vengeful as a

tiger against those who injured him, was mild as a dove before the voice of kindness.

"Montezuma is ready to lay down his life for those who love him," he said.

Of such was the race whom, a few hundred years ago, the Spaniard came to convert and—to conquer.

The Christian soldier and the Christian priest strode hand in hand over populous nations—peaceful races—of vast wealth in the precious metals, marvelously skilled in the arts and of a high grade of civilization. Mild and loving by nature they offered the hand of friendship to the pale stranger from the East. What was given in return? With one hand the Bible; with the other fire, torture, the sword—or, perpetual slavery in the depths of the earth laden with chains and doomed to eternal night!

No wonder that the curse of revolutions, the instrument of an avenging Providence, rests even to the present day upon the Spanish Conquests in America!

"A guard is stationed without," continued Montezuma; "I know not how many. We are hemmed in at both ends."

This information, though not unexpected, came with direful import to the ears of the little party.

"How came you to escape their aim?" asked Moore.

"When I reached the corner of the bowlder, instead of thrusting my head into sight, I showed my foxskin cap, after hanging it to a stick."

The Indian as he spoke, pointed to his head-covering, an article sometimes worn by the southern tribes.

"A clever ruse—and then?"

"I dropped the cap just at the edge of the bowlder. In the moonlight the guard supposed it to contain a human head."

"Well?" exclaimed the others anxiously.

"The guard first reloaded his gun, and then advanced cautiously to examine his supposed work."

"Go on."

"He came within reach of my hunting-knife. He is dead."

The Indian smiled grimly as he gave this concise conclusion to his adventure, and half withdrew the deadly knife still red with recent blood, from his girdle.

Birdie Lester shuddered and could not restrain a slight movement of repulsion at the cool tone of the Indian in announcing a necessary but still terrible deed.

"Do not blame him," whispered Richard Moore in her ear. "What he has done will perhaps lead us into safety."

Turning again to Montezuma, he said:

"Was this man you slew the only one that made known his presence?"

"No. A second came forth from the rocks directly after the first."

"Ah! and what became of him?"

"On seeing his companion suddenly fall he took to his heels and made for the opposite thicket as though pursued by spirits."

"And you saw no one else?"

"No one save those two."

"Then depend upon it," said Moore emphatically, "they were the only men left on the watch. The second man would not have run away as you describe had there been others to support him."

The Indian agreed to this conclusion as reasonable. At the same time he recommended caution.

"Certainly," responded Moore, "and I think I have a plan that will test the matter."

Richard Moore had his hand on the huge rocking stone, ready to make his exit, when a terrific explosion, which seemed to rend the lofty vault above, and nearly deafened them, brought him to an abrupt pause.

"Heavens!" cried he, "Balboaz has really blown open the secret door!"

The sound, reverberating along the narrow aisles and confined passages of the tunnel, lasted some minutes, surpassing the loudest thunder in intensity, and gradually lessening to a majestic close, like the roar of a hundred lions.

"Let him come," cried Montezuma. "If he does not meet his fate in this sanctuary of my forefathers it will be because the Evil One protects him."

"I mope we be seekin' safer quarters in de mean time," said Sam, who began to have strong suspicions that they were by no means clear of the trap.

All agreed to this opinion. Moore leading, they left the wonderful cavern, and by close pressing managed to find room behind the large bowlder.

As the strange rocking-stone closed to behind them the Indian turned with a solemn prayer, as if bidding a last farewell.

The lieutenant, following out the plan he had formed, suddenly leaped upon the flat summit of the bowlder—stood for an instant erect, his tall form showing prominent in the moonlight, and then dropped flat upon his hands.

Had any one been watching, this movement ought certainly to have provoked some notice.

Everything remained still as a graveyard.

"We are safe at this end, I think," said the soldier, leaping down. "Let us now take a straight course for the horses. Once mounted, we can snap our fingers at Senor Balboaz."

Another interruption came at this point—this time in the shape of human shrieks and cries, as of men in agony, seemingly from the very bosom of the mountain.

A shudder of horror pervaded all, save, perhaps, Montezuma.

"Come, let us away from this place of horrors," cried the lieutenant. "Nothing shall ever prevail on me to revisit it."

We will not describe the toilsome journey down the mountain-side.

When they had reached a point only some few hundred yards from the place where the horses were tethered Moore called a halt.

He had observed that Birdie Lester, though making brave efforts to conceal it, was nearly overcome by fatigue.

Their exciting and long-continued flight had proved too great a strain on her system, used though she was to an active out-door life.

Though she protested earnestly, he insisted that she should rest; and led her to a secluded nook beneath a spreading chestnut, almost entirely hidden by a semi-tropic vegetation.

"Here you will be safe," he said; "and, for better protection, I will leave Montezuma as a guard. It is useless to tire yourself by proceeding further, as we must return to this point to get into the regular road."

No objection could be made to this. So the Indian and Birdie were left beneath the chestnut.

Richard Moore and Sam then hastened on alone at an increased pace to the spot where they had left their horses and rifles previous to undertaking to spy out the Camp of Raiders.

As they entered the smooth glade beneath the thick shadows of the magnolia trees, and the dark forms of the horses were already dimly seen, Sam, who could see like a cat in the dark, suddenly dropped to his hands and knees.

"Hist! Mars' Moore—shoah's you am libin', hyar am a red-skin's track!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE AMBUSH.

AT THIS startling discovery of Sam's, the lieutenant dropped also to his knees, and examined keenly the faint imprint on the soft turf.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Wal," said Sam slowly, "it am sartin some one hab bin hyar an' foun' de hosses."

"But the horses are bo h safe. No one has disturbed them."

"Jes' so. Don't yer see he war not after the hosses, but somebody else?"

"It looks strongly that way. The fact of his trying to conceal his presence shows some further design not yet accomplished."

"Percisely—an' in my 'pinion dat design 'll show itself double-quick 'f we tries to get dem hosses."

"You think—"

"No thinkin' 'bout it. I'm dead sartin dat serpent Bilboes, or sum ob his band, hab sot anudder trap fo' us, an' in dis bery spot."

Sam's train of reasoning had hit the truth exactly.

The lieutenant was not long in coming to the same conclusion, though he did not put such implicit faith in it as Sam.

"It is lucky your sight is as keen as it is," he said. "Had it not been for your seeing this track we should have infallibly run straight into an ambush."

"Sartin; but what am we to do fur hosses?"

"We must make a circuit and take these raiders as they intended to take us—by surprise."

"Sartin. But s'posin' dere am too many fo' us!"

"We can draw them off, if we cannot drive them; and once at a suitable distance, we can double on them and make for our horses."

The leader of the party of raiders, who had been sent to lay an ambush for the two scouts, had calculated wrongly if he imagined two such wary men could be surprised with only the ordinary precautions.

In leaving that one track uncovered he had sealed the fate of his enterprise.

The party of sixteen had carefully ensconced themselves in the deep gloom of bushes and overarching trees, on either side of the narrow ravine in which the horses were secured, and directly opposite each other.

They fancied they had a sure thing against the pertinacious foes who had trailed them thus far into the mountains.

They waited in silence during the interval it took the little party of four to make the distance from the cave to the ravine containing the horses.

They waited, their carbines poised at such close range that a volley would inevitably prove fatal to any one coming between the two fires.

The low sound of voices came faintly to their ears. They at once guessed that their victims were approaching. They clutched their carbines closer in anxious suspense.

But the voices do not come nearer. Finally they cease and depart altogether.

The leader Gomez curses a little in Spanish, but can only wait with increasing anxiety to find out the meaning of it all.

He does not wait long before a sharp report greets his ears, coming directly from behind. The bullet hisses past his head and buries itself in a tree in front.

"Carambo!" exclaims the Mexican, "the trick is discovered! Turn, boys, and after them. They have nothing but their revolvers, at any rate."

A few other choice commands, sprinkled with oaths, aroused the Apaches and half-breeds to pursuit.

It would have required very little inducement to cause them to run the other way, so panic-stricken were they at the sudden crack of a revolver from behind—a point totally unexpected.

As it was, they all, those on the other side of the ravine as well, ran pell mell through the dense growth of trees and bushes, without path or guide, directed only by the tantalizing crack of a pistol, echoing forth at intervals, which lured them on without ever allowing them to catch a glimpse of the desired objects.

This will-o'-the-wisp game had lasted perhaps half an hour, when all at once the Mexican who acted as leader realized that all further sound had ceased in front—the revolver reports no longer sounded out through the quiet forest.

For the first time he realized the game that had been played upon him. In his eagerness to slay Balboaz's two bitter foes, he had allowed himself to be lured away thus far from his post, while the two experienced woodmen had already doubled on him, and were probably half-way back to their horses.

He first allowed himself time for a volley of Spanish oaths, then gave orders to turn back and make all haste to the little ravine.

This did not prove an easy matter.

In the two miles they had traversed the sixteen Apaches and half-breeds had become so scattered that only two answered to the Mexican's call.

These slowly retraced their steps, and by dint of continued shouting, nearly all were finally reunited.

All but three.

These three were brothers, Indians, and were ranked in the estimation of Balboaz above the rest of their tribe for shrewdness and courage.

They were noble specimens of the native Americans—tall, athletic, and stepping with a peculiar, springy movement that evinced the perfection of health and animal spirits.

When the rest of the raiders had followed after the two scouts, they sprung forward, among the foremost; but a very few minutes sufficed to show the elder of the brothers the nature of the ruse being played upon them.

A quickly-exchanged whisper made the remaining two acquainted with his discovery. Another declared their united resolution to reap the benefit of it themselves.

The promise of two thousand pesos by Balboaz to the slayers of the two scouts had not been lost upon them.

Unobserved, they separated from the main body of the pursuers, and returned directly to the little ravine and the horses.

They threw themselves flat upon the ground beneath the dense shade of the magnolia trees, scarcely a yard from the tethered horses.

They lay in silence, like stealthy tigers, waiting for the moment to spring upon their prey.

Their plan had been as cleverly conceived as it was crafty in execution.

They hear swift footsteps coming over the hills to the left.

This time Sam and the lieutenant fancy they may secure their horses without further trouble.

They hastily descend the slope to their steeds. The lieutenant has already one hand on the horse's mane—the other stretched forth for untying the reins from their fastening.

The three brothers choose this moment for their attack. With a united bound they spring up from the dark turf, and fiercely launch themselves like a human tornado on the two friends.

Fortunately for the latter, the horses stood between the two parties, otherwise the attack would have been certainly fatal.

This circumstance compelled the three Indians to run around the steeds before they could reach their victims.

The interval was scarcely three seconds, but it served to put our friends in an attitude of defense.

They had no time to use their revolvers.

For a brief but fearful space nothing was heard but the clash of knives and the deep-drawn breath of the combatants.

Two of the Indian brothers fell upon Richard Moore as being the greater prize.

Sam had all he could do to manage the other.

It took but a moment for the brave lieutenant to see that a regular set-to with knives, against two Indian braves each more skillful

than himself in the use of that weapon, would inevitably end in his own fall.

The first attack had already resulted in a slight cut in the arm, while his assailants were untouched.

His fertile brain soon conceived a novel mode of defense.

Suddenly, without a moment's warning, he darted off at full speed toward the mouth of the ravine.

CHAPTER XXIII. GONE!

RICHARD MOORE possessed great swiftness of foot and for a few seconds made the ground fly from under him.

The two Indians raised a yell at what they took to be the cowardly flight of their victim; and without a moment's hesitation bounded after him, one leading the other by a few yards.

They were mistaken if they thought the white scout was going to indulge them in a long race.

He had not run perhaps fifty yards, during which brief interval he had drawn and cocked his revolver, when, quick as lightning he wheeled and dropped to his hands and knees.

He had calculated the moment to a nicety. The foremost Apache was almost upon him when this to him, astonishing maneuver occurred.

He could not stop himself in his headlong speed, and striking the unforeseen obstacle was hurled in a series of somersaults along the soft turf.

At the same instant almost, the lieutenant's revolver spoke sharply forth, and the second Indian, also rushing upon him at full speed, fell lifeless.

Then turning quickly the same deadly weapon was directed against the other Apache who had just risen from his terrible fall.

"Stop where you are," said Richard Moore in Spanish. "You are at liberty to go if you choose; but another step against me will be your last. I hold your life in my hand."

Whether or no the Indian understood he did not heed. The sight of his lifeless brother frightened him. With a fierce yell resembling that of a wild beast he rushed upon Moore with upraised knife.

It was his last attack upon a living foe.

The deadly bullet arrested him before he had taken two steps, and he fell. His bronze features still contorted with the mad passion that had driven him to his fate.

An expression of sorrow rested upon the pale features of the lieutenant as he replaced the weapon he had used so effectively.

He would willingly have spared the fierce red-men who had sought his life could he have done so without sealing his own fate.

As it was he could only cast one glance of regret on the tall muscular forms stretched out on the green sod. Then he turned and retraced his steps to the horses.

The result of the fight had been equally fortunate in that quarter. He found Sam slowly wiping his knife on the grass, while the third Indian, the eldest of the brothers, lay stretched out before him.

An ugly knife-thrust in the side showed in what manner he had encountered death.

"I'm heartily glad to find you've conquered, Sam," said Moore.

"Yer may well say so, Mars' Moore. It am de toughest scramble Ise had fur a long time."

"It was a tight pinch all round."

"Sartin. I'd as lief tackle a well-grown painter as one ob dem same red-skins. A knife in dere han's am like a streak o' blue lightnin'."

"You were lucky in coming off with a sound skin."

"Mo' luck dan sciens by a long sight. Jes' look at dat, Mars' Moore, if yer wants to see an egzample ob Provydential interferences."

Whereupon Sam pulled forth from a breast-pocket a much-worn copy of the New Testament; for the negro scout was a steady-going Baptist and zealous in his religious belief.

The sacred book thus displayed to Richard Moore's gaze showed plainly where the sharp point of a knife had pierced the leathern cover, almost exactly in the center. The force of the blow must have been great, for as Sam fluttered the leaves the very last showed a faint impress of the weapon's point.

"What sez yer to that?" asked Sam.

"Wonderful!" said the lieutenant as he examined the volume.

"So thought the pesky red-skin. He wer' struck all of a heap when he found, as I s'pose he 'maged, dat my body wer' knife-proof. Ef it hadn't been fur 'is 'stonishment, I'd 'a' neber foun' a chance to land the blow I did."

"Well, the affair is over and it behooves us to return as quickly as possible to Birdie Lester and her protector."

"Sartin, 'sides, de rest ob dem rascals will be trooping back d'reckly, mad as stirred-up hornets."

"We'll see that they do not catch us here. While I am untying the horses, you may get the rifles."

No time was lost by the lieutenant. The

horses were loosened, and he was just mounting his own black mare, when a startled cry from Sam stopped him.

"What in thunder's up now, I wonder?" thought the lieutenant, who was becoming angry at so many delays.

With a hasty word to the horses to stand, he hurried in the direction Sam had taken.

Their rifles had been hidden in a hollow log, which they had discovered on one side of the ravine.

When Moore was near enough to see the negro in the darkness, he found the latter standing motionless a yard or so from the log and gazing at it as if it contained some deadly foe.

"What is it, Sam? Not Apaches this time, I hope?"

"No, sah," replied Sam, scratching his woolly head. "But it am somethin' a pesky deal like 'em."

"But what is it?"

"Rattlesnakes."

"Where—in the log?"

"Yes, sah."

"Why don't you drive them out? Are you afraid of them?"

"I ain't 'feared ob de sarpints," said Sam, in defense of his courage. "A knock on de head will settle 'em every time. But dat amn't all."

"Why—what else is the matter?"

"One ob de rattlers hab crept into your gun."

The lieutenant stared a moment. Then the novelty of the situation, together with Sam's perplexity, struck him as irresistibly comical.

In spite of their many perilous surroundings he could not restrain his mirth at the situation.

When he had partly recovered himself, he said:

"Can't you get him to come out?"

"No, sah. When I tuk hold on de barrel to pull out de gun, he commenced hissin'. I hadn't got it mo' dan half-way when his tail began to peep out, an' I dropt it."

"And he crept back?"

"Yes, sah."

"He has a fancy for the smell of powder. The gun is loaded, is it not?"

"Yes, sah."

Moore looked at the half protruding rifle. To all appearance it was empty of any unusual contents.

"I have an idea, Sam, how to expel the unwelcome guest."

"Out wid it den, fur I'se gettin' tired ob dis interruption bizness."

The lieutenant stepped forward, and with a quick movement drew the rifle from the log, and, placing it to his shoulder, fired.

Where that serpent went to remains a mystery to Sam to this day.

The other rifle being procured without further trouble from rattlesnakes, the two friends returned to their horses, and mounting, rode once more thoroughly equipped out of the little ravine. They turned up the sloping mountain-side toward the point where Montezuma had been left to act as guard over Birdie Lester.

They left the ravine just in time for their own safety.

The report of the rifle fired by Moore had reached the ears of the raiders led by the Mexican, and had hastened their steps to the scene of their late ambush.

They found nothing to reward their haste save the sight of vacancy where had stood the two horses, and the cold forms of the three Indian brothers.

We leave them to vent their rage on the empty air, while we return to the two scouts.

They rode silently but swiftly up the steep slope—a narrow bridle-path afforded a passage to the rough mountain road above.

The distance is short and they soon reach the point where Montezuma had been left with his beautiful charge.

Eagerly Richard Moore rushes into the secluded glade where towered the lofty chestnut.

He uttered a cry of grief and astonishment. The Indian and the maid are gone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BALBOAZ IN THE SECRET TUNNEL.

THE explosion heard by the four fugitives as they were escaping from the secret caverns had, as they rightly guessed, destroyed the only barrier between them and their foes.

The dark entrance suddenly revealed by the force of a powerful blast was immediately thronged by the forms of men pressing eagerly into the strange underground passage.

Balboaz himself was at their head.

Various members of the gang were provided with torches which had been gathered outside during the preparations for blasting.

The only question that troubled them was what direction to pursue.

The numerous branches to the right and left would scarcely fail to lead them astray.

This difficulty was solved by Balboaz.

A small pocket-compass in his possession would enable him to choose the right course, as he knew exactly the location of the other entrance.

Thus provided he cautiously advanced at the

head of his gang in the wake of the three men and the rescued girl.

His mind was bent too earnestly on the object in hand to give much heed to the curiosities and beauties of the caverns.

Finally, having succeeded in keeping the straight course so far, they come into the narrow passage near the center of which lay the treacherous bridge.

To the eyes of the gang of raiders all appeared solid ground before them.

It happened, just as they were a few yards from the false bridge, that the shot fired by the Mexican at Montezuma, reached their ears, coming from the direction they were pursuing.

The noise of the report excited Balboaz.

He relied upon the two guards to hold the entrance a short time. But he knew that in case of a fight with two such men as Sam and the lieutenant the odds were greatly in favor of the latter.

Hence he shouted as he sprung forward.

"Quick, men! they are out already."

But the last word had scarcely left his lips when he felt the ground sinking beneath him.

With the quick instinct that danger gives he felt that he was lost if he paused an instant.

He made two swift but light bounds even as the treacherous structure was breaking beneath him.

By almost a miracle, he struck the solid ground beyond, clearing by barely an inch the edge of the fatal chasm.

But as he landed he heard shrieks and cries behind him.

It was these shrieks of stout men falling into the terrible abyss that caused the escaping fugitives to shudder with horror.

These men had been following immediately at the heels of Balboaz, and when he uttered the cry—"Quick, men! they are out already," they rushed impetuously forward.

But while he reached the opposite side in safety, they fell with the crumbling bridge into the depths of the fearful chasm.

Those in the rear, some sixteen or seventeen in number, warned in time by the cries of those falling, paused in horror on the edge of the abyss.

On one side stood Balboaz, on the other the remnant of his ill fated band.

From the seemingly impassable gulf between rose the groans of the wounded who had not been favored by instant death.

It was an anxious moment for Balboaz.

Provided the two scouts had not yet left the tunnel there was nothing to prevent them returning and slaying him as he stood alone and defenseless.

He could see no way of passing the chasm, without ordering his men to return back and secure some sort of a material for a foot-bridge.

This would possibly consume an hour's time, during which the two scouts with the rescued prize would be far beyond his reach.

He had by no means given up the idea of recapturing Birdie Lester and punishing her rescuers.

His fiery Spanish heart had been attracted toward the beautiful girl with an intensity that would not be thwarted.

In his present difficulty it occurred to him that the fugitive party must have had some secret means of crossing the chasm.

With the aid of his torch, which he had not dropped even in his thrilling escape, he examined each of the walls towering straight up on either side of the abyss.

He soon discovered the flat structure of boards that lay snugly against one side. Then the torch-light revealed the iron lever, the use of which he at once guessed.

Pressing this down with considerable force the movable bridge descended, and once more the awful depths it concealed were as if they had no existence.

Balboaz retained the bridge thus, while the others passed over.

He then suffered it to rise to its former position.

"What is that for?" asked one of the men.

"To see if any poor fellow down there is still alive."

He pointed into the yawning gulf of darkness.

He then called several times in a loud voice but received no answer.

"Now for their slayers!" he added, fiercely turning and hastening forward in the direction he had taken from the first.

The members of the gang, who still survived, followed.

Without further halt they reach the chamber containing the rocking-stone.

Some time was spent by Balboaz in ferreting out this secret of nature.

By recalling carefully the locality as he remembered it from the outside, and comparing it with the needle of his compass he succeeded in finding it.

What, with all his strength he could not stir on the outside, now moved with a slight push.

They all passed through the strange entrance.

Balboaz glanced around on the narrow starlit defile.

As far as he could see over the shadowed landscape not a soul was visible.

Neither could he hear anything save the faint whispering of wind through the cedars ahead.

"The cowards have fled!" he muttered angrily.

But as he stepped from behind the huge boulder he stumbled across the dead body of the Mexican slain by Montezuma.

"*Carambo!*" he cried, as he recognized the upturned face, "am I to lose all my men through those accursed scouts?"

There was little affection for the dead Mexican in his tone, but more of wrath and of chagrin that his once powerful band was being so seriously reduced.

Above all he was beginning to nourish a deadly hatred against the determined men who were slowly trailing him to his last retreat.

"The best trap remains un sprung," he muttered savagely, half to his men, half to himself. "When they go for their horses Gomez and his party will give them a reception they little expect. On, my men! I must see their dead bodies before the sun rises. It will be a faint salve for the gaps they have made in the band to-night."

The men followed, obedient to his order. They passed through the thicket of cedar and took the same path down the mountain-side previously traversed by the little band of fugitives.

When they reached a point from which the path diverged that led down to the little ravine, the sound of two pistol-shots coming from that direction brought the party to a sudden halt.

These were the shots fired by Richard Moore, that had suddenly ended the career of the two Apache brothers.

Immediately following the pistol-shots and as if an echo to it a faint scream was heard to the left of Balboaz's party.

"What was that?" whispered one of the men.

"A woman's voice, evidently," said the chief, eagerly; "and there can be but one woman in this part of the mountain."

They listened intently.

No further sound came from the direction of the voice.

Balboaz's plan was soon laid.

He ordered his men to follow him.

They advanced stealthily in the direction of the chestnut tree beneath which Birdie Lester and the Indian were sitting.

The darkness and silence with which they advanced rendered their approach undiscernible even to the quick senses of the Indian.

Suddenly, out from the surrounding bushes spring the dark forms of Balboaz and his men, the former crying out:

"Ah, my pretty bird! I have caught you at last."

CHAPTER XXV.

RECAPTURED.

As Balboaz uttered the words in an exultant tone, "I have caught you at last," he cast his Spanish cloak over the unfortunate girl's head, thus stifling the cry that rose to her lips.

Then clasping her in his strong arms, he turned to find his men still engaged in a desperate struggle with Montezuma.

As for Birdie Lester, blissful unconsciousness rendered her oblivious to this new disaster in her fortunes.

The Indian, at the first appearance of the invaders, had sprung up knife in hand, prepared to die in defense of the fair girl committed to his charge.

He made a desperate resistance, but the odds were too great. He was finally overpowered, but not until two dead and several wounded were left as trophies of his valor.

In the short space of one minute Birdie Lester became once more a captive to the crafty Balboaz, and Montezuma, her brave defender, lay bound and helpless.

"What shall we do with him?"

Such was the question of one of the raiders as he administered a brutal kick on the prostrate form of the Indian.

The question was mutely echoed by those around, and their vengeful glances showed that no gentle fate awaited Montezuma were he left to their mercy.

"Bring him along," commanded Balboaz, still holding the senseless girl in his arms. "We have no time to give him his deserts here. Besides, I have a special purpose for which he must be reserved."

One of the men cut the thong that bound the Indian's feet.

He rose at once without waiting for orders.

Four men, such was their wholesome dread of his power, were detailed to guard Montezuma.

Another aided Balboaz in carrying the helpless girl.

The whole party then turned and retraced their steps to the little valley where they had first encamped.

There arrangements were made for an immediate departure.

The horses were caught; the little tent folded up and its furniture packed on mules; a litter was made for Birdie Lester, who had awakened to the full realization of her misery.

They only waited the return of the Mexican with the men who had been sent to lay in ambush for the two scouts.

These soon made their appearance, their downcast looks and angry voices declaring the failure of their mission.

Balboaz guessed that something untoward had happened.

"Well, Gomez?" he said, interrogatively.

The man approached the subject reluctantly.

"Cap'n, I did my best."

"That is taken for granted. But what did you do—anything?"

"Those two men are in league with Satan. They got clear away—horses and all."

"Got their horses! And you with sixteen men, not a dozen yards off?"

"Wait till you hear all."

Gomez then related the ruse that had been played upon them; also, the discovery of the three dead brothers.

"*Diablo!*" cried Balboaz, "those men are no ordinary foes. We are not safe so long as they are alive to trail us like sleuth-hounds."

"But how are we to get rid of them?"

"We must watch them as stealthily and perseveringly as they watch us. I appoint you to that duty. Take one of the Indians to assist you. You will linger here until after we are gone, as we shall be in a few moments. Those fellows will certainly visit this camp. Keep your eye on their movements, trail them cautiously, and when the time comes—strike."

As the last emphatic word left his lips, Balboaz turned and gave hasty orders for leaving the little valley.

Five minutes later one coming suddenly upon the remote vale, with its clear, sparkling stream, would have seen no sign of a human being's presence.

Nevertheless, high up among the crags on one side were concealed the Mexican Gomez, and a companion of the treacherous Apache tribe.

They wait with the cruel impatience of tigers the appearance of Richard Moore and the colored scout.

And as they wait, the first golden flush of the coming dawn creeps above the mountain-tops, casting a halo of glory over the rugged cliffs and the green, meadow-like valley.

Away up in the remotest and most rugged section of the great Sierra Madre range, the bandit chief Balboaz had pitched his mountain stronghold.

It was a strange, wild locality, adapted by nature for the refuge of outlaws and all whose desperate deeds had rendered them fugitives from justice.

But the natural defenses of the place had been immeasurably increased by the hand of art.

One single narrow road, hewn in the face of the cliff, led up to a broad ledge, over a hundred feet in height. On the flat summit of this ledge his band had their dwelling-places in rows of low, adobe huts. Room was even found for stables in which their horses were kept in time of danger.

Other than this narrow path there was no visible approach. Naught but perpendicular cliffs arose from the smooth vale at their foot, forming a majestic amphitheater, the two arms of which reaching far around, projected from the face of the main ridge towering far above.

The flat summit of what we may call the two arms of the semicircle had been chosen by Balboaz as a mountain stronghold, which a very few men might hold against a thousand.

The entrance to the single narrow road or rather path was guarded where it opened on the summit by two small cannon which had been conveyed with immense labor to their airy situation.

These, loaded with grape, slugs, nails, etc., would give a warm reception to whoever should attempt to storm the bandits' stronghold by the only feasible entrance.

This road opened on that one of the projecting cliffs given up to the main portion of the band.

The other cliff, directly opposite, but entirely separated from its mate by the intervening chasm, could only be reached by a secret passage at the rear, dug through the main body of the mountain.

This was set apart for Balboaz himself, and a few of his most trusted dependents.

But the abode of the bandit chief was not confined to these exterior ledges jutting forth from the mountain. Those wonderful architects, the Aztecs, had been here before him and hewn out a perfect labyrinth into the very heart of the mountain. Centuries before had this industrious people contrived this effective refuge against their hated foe, the Spaniard.

There were legends even yet of buried treasures and secret chambers unknown to Balboaz himself.

The source of water supply was remarkably convenient for so elevated a situation.

Near the center of the ledge to which Balboaz confined himself, was a cold, clear pool of water inclosed in a deep basin, which was never known to fall below a certain height.

Several attempts had been made to sound

this pool, but no line had ever been known to touch bottom.

Neither was there any visible outlet to its waters.

The Indians looked upon it with superstitious awe, even though compelled to drink of its waters.

In this seemingly impregnable stronghold, two days after the departure of Balboaz from the little valley, a stirring scene was being transacted.

In one of the inner chambers, hewn out of the solid rock and reached by a narrow passage opening from the outer ledge, stood a group of five men around the form of another man, stretched horizontally on a curious looking frame, to which he was fastened hand and foot.

The curious-looking frame was that terrible instrument of torture, the rack.

The man fastened upon it and about to be doomed to the agony of having his joints pulled asunder, was the Indian, Montezuma.

Of the five men standing round we see our old friend Balboaz, three of his trusted Mexicans, and an Indian clad in the garb of the Apache.

It is Balboaz who holds the prominent position at the head of the iron frame, and who does the speaking.

The room, unlike most of the others, which were richly furnished with thick carpets, tapestried hangings, and upholstery, the product of many a raid, is cold and bare, and destitute of every vestige of furniture, save the terrible-looking apparatus in the center.

Naught but the bare stone walls, lighted very dimly by a single ray through the open door, greets the eyes of the bound Indian.

Everything is cleverly calculated to subdue his courage and render him passive in the hands of the remorseless Balboaz.

"I shall ask but one question," said Balboaz, "that question to be repeated till it is answered, or—till you are dead. For," he added, a tigerish gleam in his eyes, "each time your refusal to answer will be followed by a turn of the screw. Gavara, stand to your post."

The Mexican thus addressed, took hold of a projecting handle.

"Now, then, ready!"

He glances a moment into the eyes of Montezuma.

If he expected any sign of weakening in those calm, bronze features he was disappointed.

The black eyes met his in a glance of calm contempt, before which that of the Spaniard wavered and sunk.

"*Carambo!*" he exclaimed angrily; "we will give you a taste of something that will take down your fortitude—a trifle. Now for the question:

"Where is the hidden treasure?"

The words echoed metallically from the stone walls.

No reply from Montezuma.

"One turn, Gavara."

Obedient to the cruel command, the Mexican gave the screw a turn. Even in the dim light the limbs of Montezuma could be seen to stretch under the leverage.

His agony must have been intense even in the first stage of the torture.

But not a quiver stirred his smooth bronze features. Like his great ancestor, he might have been sleeping on a bed of roses for all outward token.

"Again," cried Balboaz, "where is the treasure?"

Silence.

"Another turn, Gavara."

The command was executed with the same mechanical indifference.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STRANGE RESCUE.

For one instant dead silence reigned in the stone chamber.

The chief actor in the tragical drama, Balboaz, stood just at the head of the bound and prostrate Indian, an anxious frown on his brow, seeking, after each repetition of his question, for some sign of weakening in his tortured victim.

At the other end of the hideous apparatus stood Gavara, whose office it was to apply the leverage to the cords that bound the Indian's hands and feet.

To the rear of both stood the two remaining Mexicans and the stoical looking Apache, watching the proceedings with varying emotions.

To all appearance Montezuma was the most unmoved of them all.

Yet the second application of the lever caused him excruciating pain. It seemed as though his limbs, with diabolical slowness, were being torn from their sockets. The intense agony lengthened the moments to hours.

But as his cruel tormentor glanced into the dark eyes and composed features, their look of dauntless resolution made him almost despair of accomplishing his purpose.

He was about to repeat the fatal question a third time when a sudden interruption occurred.

The Apache, who all this time had maintained an unbroken silence, now stepped for-

ward. Whether purposely or not, he advanced between Balboaz and his victim. A long buffalo-robe was flung over one arm. He bent his head respectfully, then bending forward he whispered a few words into the bandit chief's ear.

The latter, already angry at being so long baffled, glanced furiously at the Indian and cried:

"Back to your place! *Diablo!* what do you mean by interrupting me at such a time? Did I not tell you to reserve your news till later?"

"You did; but Creeping Fox thought you would leap to hear our success."

"No matter. Out of my way till I finish this wretched Montezuma. I will torture him to the death but what I worm the secret from his stubborn breast."

The Apache respectfully resumed his position in the background.

But he had accomplished his purpose.

During the brief moment he had stood between Montezuma and the leader of the bandits grasping a knife in his right hand, under the friendly concealment of the buffalo-robe he had deftly cut the cords binding the left hand of the suffering Indian.

So quickly had the movement been performed that not even the Mexican, Gavara, perceived it.

When the Apache, who had acted so singularly in behalf of Montezuma, withdrew his hand, it no longer held the knife. That was grasped in the left hand of Montezuma.

The latter, so soon as he perceived a prospect of freedom open before him, manifested as on a former occasion, a surprising promptitude in taking advantage of it.

The agony he was enduring seemed to spur him to ten-fold activity.

Thus, as soon as he grasped the friendly knife, and just as the Apache stepped back, he severed the remaining cords, leaped from the terrible instrument, and as the startled Gavara rushed forward to secure him, finished the work by plunging the knife into the Mexican's breast.

The next moment he sprang past Balboaz and through the open door.

Balboaz had been dazed for a moment by this sudden and almost miraculous change of affairs.

The sight of the Indian escaping acted as a reviver.

"After him!" he cried, as he himself dashed forward at full speed. "*Diablo!* the very fiends are against me," he muttered to himself, as he tried hard to gain on the fleeing Montezuma; "this is the third time he has escaped me."

The Indian, after escaping from the room, turned directly toward the entrance that opened upon the broad ledge extending some hundreds of yards beyond.

When those pursuing saw him take this course they laughed derisively, for they knew that nothing short of the birds of the air could descend from it to the valley below. On whichever side Montezuma might turn naught but a precipice reaching sheer down hundreds of feet, awaited him.

"Take it easy," said Balboaz, laughing, and settling down to a walk, "the fool will only prolong his sufferings a few more hours. He cannot escape us."

As Montezuma turned and saw that his pursuers were slowly sauntering after him, he smiled to himself, and also altered his pace to a walk.

In this manner they proceeded till the Indian at last stood on the brink of the deep basin in which shone darkly clear the waters of what was known as the "Bottomless Pool."

Here he paused and turned defiantly on his pursuers, like a noble stag at bay.

The latter were not more than twenty yards away when Balboaz shouted:

"Ah, Montezuma! you see how useless your efforts are. What I have set my heart on must be mine. Only reveal the secret of the treasure and you are free to go where you please."

"Your words are wasted, Balboaz—bandit—stealer of cattle—torturer of the defenseless! Your barbarous arts are as useless against me as the idle wind. You wish the buried treasures of the Montezumas?"

"Yes, and, *diablo!* I intend to have them." was the fierce reply, and making a slight signal, Balboaz and the two Mexicans rushed forward to seize him.

Montezuma retreated one step and cried:

"Dare to follow me, Balboaz, and you shall behold treasures greater than your paltry imagination ever conceived."

Then, shaking his fist defiantly at the bandit leader, who was almost upon him, he turned and leaped into the "Bottomless Pool."

A cry of astonishment broke from the two Mexicans and they rushed forward to gaze into the fathomless waters which the Indian had chosen for his grave.

Anxiously they look for his reappearance, but not a ripple disturbed the smooth surface of the pool, after the commotion created by his first plunge had subsided.

"Holy saints!" exclaimed one of the Mexicans, "he has gone down like lead."

Balboaz was mad with rage.

"Curses! ten thousand curses on the whole affair! Why didn't I guess that he was going to destroy himself? Now the link is gone forever—the only link by which I could reach the countless treasures of the Montezumas."

He paused a moment, exhausted by passion. Then he turned suddenly upon his nearest subordinate:

"How did he get loose? How did he cut his bonds—bound hand and foot as he was? How did he get hold of a knife? These questions he hissed forth without a moment's pause.

"It is all a mystery," answered the one addressed. "It all occurred after that Indian, Creeping Fox, spoke to you."

"Ah, I remember—the wily scoundrel! If I find he has had a hand in this I'll flay him alive. Some one fetch him into the torture-chamber."

It was thus the bare, desolate-looking room that contained the rack was called.

It will be seen that Balboaz was a fit descendant of his ancestors, the soldiers of the Inquisition.

At the sudden and startling escape of Montezuma, his attention had been entirely diverted from the Apache, Creeping Fox.

Hence, not until his name was mentioned did he guess that he might have had some share in the transaction.

Meantime he returned to the torture-chamber.

The Mexican he had dispatched soon reappeared, but alone.

"Well?" said Balboaz, interrogatively.

"Creeping Fox is not to be found. One of the men over at the camp says he saw him descending to the valley not five minutes ago."

"That settles it," cried the chief, jumping up. "There is some devilry at work. It has wormed itself into our most secret stronghold, and by all the saints in the calendar, I believe those American scouts have turned up again!"

He had scarcely ceased when a tap on the door sounded, and immediately after entered Gomez, without hat or coat, and almost shoeless.

Balboaz sprang forward to meet him.

"Quick!" he cried; "did you meet, as you came up, an Indian dressed like Creeping Fox?"

"I did. He is no more Creeping Fox than I am."

"Then why in the name of all that's wonderful did you let him go?"

"Because," said Gomez, "I'd as lief tackle a grizzly as that man."

"Who is he?"

"No other than Richard Moore, the fellow that's followed us clear from Texas."

CHAPTER XXVII.

GOMEZ'S TALE.

THE renowned leader of outlaws and cattle-stealers could not restrain a sudden backward movement at mention of Richard Moore's name.

That name had come to have a dread significance for him.

He remained silent a moment, with frowning brow, then he said emphatically:

"By Heavens, you are right! Now that I recall his form and gesture as he spoke to me, I am astonished that I did not recognize him. But who would have looked for him under the guise of an Apache?"

"Who would have looked for him in any guise here, in the very heart of his enemy's most secret stronghold?"

There was a latent irony in the Mexican's words which the keen-witted Balboaz was quick to detect.

"And you," he retorted fiercely—"I left you with special orders to shadow this man—to trail him incessantly, to destroy him—him and his negro mate. How have you executed the commission?"

Before the embarrassed Gomez could reply, he went on:

"Now you return alone, half-naked, and coolly announce to me that you have just passed this man—the man you were ordered to put out of the way—and have let him go unharmed. How happens it that he has entered our camp ahead of you? How happens it that he wears the clothes of Creeping Fox? Where is the real Creeping Fox, the Indian I left with you?"

Gomez quailed before the fierce manner of his questioner.

He answered in a tone sufficiently humble: "I confess, captain, I have been beaten and outwitted. But if you will hear my tale through you will grant that no one in the band could have come off any better."

Balboaz gave a grumbling assent, and the Mexican commenced the narrative of his adventures, the substance of which is as follows:

When Gomez and the Indian Creeping Fox were left behind at the little valley, they had concealed themselves among the rocks, for they were certain that the two scouts would not fail to revisit the vacant camp.

In this hope they were not disappointed. The

lieutenant and Sam, after carefully reconnoitering the ground, rode boldly in with the first rays of the morning sun.

After examining the tracks of the horses, they immediately followed on the trail of Balboaz and his men.

They betrayed by no backward look the fear of being followed.

Gomez and his companion acted with great caution.

They followed the two scouts for some miles into the mountains without exciting the slightest suspicion.

It was late in the evening when Richard Moore and Sam arrived at a small mountain inn.

The inn, or rather shanty, was a rude, flat-roofed structure built of logs, the numerous crevices plastered shut with "dobbin."

Moore knew he was running considerable risk in thus seeking food and shelter at a place so near Balboaz's head-quarters.

But the constant strain of the preceding night and day had proved too much even for the stalwart lieutenant and Sam's iron frame.

They were both dead-tired and half-starved. But rest was the first imperative need, and all that they asked the gray-haired, beetle-browed host was for a cup of strong coffee and beds.

Contrary to their expectations, they were treated very politely.

While the coffee was preparing under the deft hands of a meager-looking female of the Mexican type—probably the landlord's wife—the two men were seated on rude cane-chairs in the best room.

The old man was very loquacious. His long life had furnished him a plentiful supply of experiences, new and interesting to the two scouts.

Moore had studied human nature too carefully to be altogether deceived by the old man's friendly manner.

Every now and then, from the midst of the stream of rude Spanish, a question would pop up regarding the names, object and destination of his guests.

The negro Sam maintained a respectful silence.

The lieutenant answered guardedly.

In the midst of their talk the coffee came in, a square-shaped board serving as a waiter.

The odorous smell that saluted their nostrils was very appetizing.

Moore, however, was not so innocent as to swallow it down, and no questions asked.

He put the cup, full to the brim, to his lips, and slightly tasted it.

"It tastes bitter," he said, making a wry face.

The negro shrewdly imitated his example and the cups were left undrained.

The sharp-featured hostess commenced volubly defending the merits of her coffee.

"Perhaps," broke in Richard Moore, "the cups were not carefully washed. I will empty these and clean them, after which we will test the good qualities of your coffee again. Or," he added, "you may drink what is in the cups yourselves if you fancy the taste."

This offer was very promptly declined.

Moore then went to the door, emptied the cups; then rinsed them carefully at a rude washstand; and lastly, filled them himself from the rude stone vessel in which the coffee was steaming.

He and Sam then drank the fragrant beverage without hesitation.

It refreshed them wonderfully, and, without further delay, they asked to be shown to their beds.

Had the old Mexican and his wife been innocent, inoffensive persons, the behavior of our heroes as recorded above would seem extremely rude.

As it happened, however, his suspicions had hit the truth. The coffee had been drugged, and had they drunk it their sleep that night would probably have lasted into eternity.

The voluble old man was no longer voluble. He saw that his two guests were altogether "too fly," and, assuming a cool, offended manner, he conducted them in silence to the room above.

The two scouts had all their weapons with them. As they entered the low-ceilinged room they deposited their rifles in convenient reach against the wall; their revolvers they placed beneath their pillows, and dressed as they were they flung themselves upon the two beds, that stood separated by a narrow space at one end of the room.

They had no further fear of their two uncanny hosts below. Since the drug had failed the two old people would scarcely attempt to plunder two resolute and well-armed men. Besides they had carefully fastened the door by pushing a large dressing-case against it. The only other entrance was a small window directly between their beds. A nail soon secured this and they considered themselves safe for the night.

They had scarcely touched the hard mattresses, which, to their wearied frames were like downy couches, when they fell into the deep slumber of exhaustion.

In peaceful slumber passed the first hours of the night.

But they were destined to be disturbed, and that seriously, ere another morn.

The stoppage of the two scouts at the inn had not been unobserved by Gomez and his Indian comrade.

When they imagined all secure and their destined victims buried in sleep, they applied for admittance at the rude door of the shanty.

They were allowed to enter after some reconnoitering on the part of the two inmates—were immediately recognized and an understanding, agreeable to both sides, arrived at.

The two menials of Balboaz were in high glee at the excellent opportunity of carrying out their important mission.

"You must go carefully," said the old Mexican. "They're cunning as foxes. We tried to drug 'em but failed."

"All right," said Gomez. "You may count on us. But how are we to get to 'em?"

"They have fastened the door," answered the pleasant-voiced host, "but there is a trap-door under one of the beds."

"Good! How shall we finish 'em Creeping Fox—knife or pistol?"

"Knife," answered the Apache laconically. The landlord soon had a small ladder set up in one corner of the room. He pointed up.

"There," said he, "is the opening."

Gomez ascended first, followed by the Indian. They are stealthy as cats in their movements.

The trap-door was lowered. It is a thrilling moment to the villainous couple below.

Slowly, stealthily, Gomez's lean form disappears through the dark opening.

The Indian follows even more stealthily.

They are both in the chamber of the sleeping scouts.

Are they sleeping?

The hearts of the cowardly landlord and his wife beat a regular tattoo in their bosoms.

Suddenly the crack of a revolver sounds forth from the room above with startling loudness, succeeded by the noise of a furious struggle.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SUDDEN VICTORY.

PROBABLY the two brave scouts had never weathered a greater peril than that encountered on this night.

They were accustomed to danger in all its shapes and forms, but in their previous adventures they had been awake and with all their wits about them.

Now, after forty-eight hours' constant strain and excitement they were just recruiting their exhausted powers in a deep refreshing slumber; and this is the moment chosen by the two midnight assassins Gomez and the Indian to steal in upon them with the deadliest purpose in their hearts.

They had actually, as we have seen, gained an entrance through the trap door that opened beneath Sam's bed.

The deep breathing of the sleeper was plainly heard by Gomez as he crawled from beneath the bed.

The Mexican smiled to himself at what he fancied would prove an easy task.

He stepped softly, the ready knife in his hand, to the side of the sleeping lieutenant.

What instinct is it that warns us even in the deepest slumber, of a strange presence—particularly if that presence be a hostile one?

That such an instinct exists thousands who will read this will testify. The mysterious currents, attractive and repulsive, that flow between man and man, belong to the phenomena of a yet unexplored science.

Some such instinct it was that caused Richard Moore in the midst of a profound slumber to suddenly open his eyes just in time to behold the dark form and upraised knife of Gomez the Mexican!

To spring up and grapple with the treacherous assailant was the work of a moment.

At the same instant, almost, Sam, awakened by the noise, grasped a revolver already cocked from beneath his pillow and let drive at the Indian, Creeping Fox, who had just emerged from beneath the bed.

At such close range it would have been remarkable if Sam's ball had missed. As it was the Indian received it full on the backbone which was broken as if it were rotten wood rendering him *hors de combat* at once and forever.

Meantime the struggle between Richard and the Mexican did not remain long doubtful. The latter was no match in wrestling with the former, whose college training now served him to good purpose, and he soon measured his length upon the floor, the knife which he still clutched, rendered useless by the strong grasp of the lieutenant.

Sam, coming to his assistance, the conquered Mexican by the aid of sundry pieces of bed-cord was soon reduced to a state of helplessness.

Then the two friends drew back to recover breath.

The lieutenant's eyes fell upon the dead Indian, Creeping Fox.

"You killed him?" he asked of Sam.

"Sartin."

"To the victor belong the spoils. I have an idea."

"What am I?"

"It strikes me as foolhardy to venture any nearer Balboaz's head-quarters in this dress. As you saw to-night, we are watched, and liable to attack at any moment. We have not a friend within fifty miles. Something must be done to equalize affairs."

"But what am we to do?" reiterated Sam.

"We must disguise ourselves."

"How?"

"I shall turn Indian, and you must be transformed to a white man."

"Great Jerusalem!" exclaimed Sam. "Yer wouldn't make me enny uglier dan I is already?"

"Ha! ha! You think painting your skin white will make you uglier? Every man to his tastes—but I advise you to overcome your prejudice this time if you value a safe skin, whether white or black."

A light was then struck in the darkened room, and the work of disguising themselves was commenced forthwith. A pouch containing paints, mixed of different clays, and brushes was found attached to the dead Indian's girdle.

This greatly assisted them, and in the course of half an hour, by aiding each other, the task was virtually complete. Richard Moore was equipped in the full dress of an Apache warrior, moccasins, tunic, feathers and all—even the features of the dead Indian had been skillfully imitated by Sam.

The latter, with some difficulty, was in like manner painted into the likeness of a white person of distinction. It was really comical to behold the change effected in Sam's personality by a deft application of the brush. When he emerged from Richard Moore's skillful hands he might readily have been taken for some Wall street banker arrived to stoutness and middle-age; or some portly Congressman, grown heavy from digesting the weighty affairs of the nation. Only the requisite broadcloth and starched linen were wanting.

The Mexican who lay bound and gagged upon the floor during these proceedings was divested of hat and coat. The broad sombrero effectually hid Sam's hair, which might otherwise have betrayed him.

Having thus effectually disguised themselves, the two scouts next considered what disposition should be made of Gomez.

To leave him in the mountain-inn would be the same as granting him freedom; as the old couple who inhabited it would hardly fail to release him at the first opportunity.

They finally resolved to take him forth to some obscure point in the forest and bind him to a tree, furnishing him food and water till some chance hunter might rescue him.

It would have served his purpose much more effectually to slay the Mexican outright; but the lieutenant objected to so barbarous a measure with abhorrence.

They withdrew the clothes-press from before their door and bore Gomez between them to the floor below. This they found deserted. Their cowardly host and his delectable wife had fled on the first sign that the struggle above was doubtful.

They marched Gomez about a mile into the wilderness, unbinding his feet for that purpose; and there left him tied securely to a sapling. His hands were partly free, to reach the food and drink brought from the inn.

Then they returned, to find their horses undisturbed in a rude shed attached to the inn.

They rode boldly forward along the narrow, rocky trail that led to Balboaz's stronghold.

It was by no means their object, however, to walk (or ride) directly into the lion's den. It had been planned between them that some small, obscure vale must be found for themselves and horses in the mountains, not too far from their enemy, and yet far enough for concealment and safety.

Such a hiding-place was found after some search not more than two miles from where they had discovered Balboaz to have fixed his head-quarters.

The vale was snugly sheltered on nearly every side by towering cliffs and shaggy forest. Best of all a clear spring bubbled forth at the foot of one of the cliffs, whose water running off in a small stream, furnished moisture to the tall, green grass—making delightful pasture for the horses.

This was to be used as a base of operations. Here the two friends rested in pleasant security nearly the whole of the following day.

Toward night Richard Moore ventured forth in his disguise, and as we have seen, successfully entered the brigands' stronghold, and succeeded once more in freeing the tortured Montezuma from his cruel captor.

He did not know, however, of the latter's plunge into the "Bottomless Pool."

He had left immediately after performing the clever feat, knowing that were his agency therein discovered his life would not be worth a moment's purchase.

As it was he made a narrow escape. Gomez

had been found some time after he had been tied up, by the host of the mountain inn. He made all haste on foot to bear the ill tidings to his chief. Hence the meeting at the foot of the steep road hewn in the cliff. Richard Moore's daring stood him in good stead here as on other occasions. Presenting a pistol at the demoralized Mexican, he said:

"Pass on, but if you dare to look back, or call an alarm until I am out of sight, I will shoot you down as I would a wild beast. Beware!"

With which words he walked on calmly. The Mexican was already completely unnerved by his recent defeat and capture. The superior moral power and bearing of the lieutenant held complete sway over him; until in the presence of his master-spirit Balboaz.

Such was the Mexican's tale, somewhat expanded into our own narrative style.

Balboaz's only remark at the conclusion was this:

"All this only proves, Gomez, that you are no match for those fellows. Since you and Creeping Fox have failed I myself will enter the lists."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A USEFUL ALLY.

WHEN Richard Moore left the mountain stronghold he made straight for the little valley where he had left Sam and the horses.

His first object was to adopt some new disguise for the one he now wore was no longer of any service, but rather the contrary.

At one point of the route he would pass within half a mile of a road connecting the towns in the plains below with the silver mines further up. He resolved to pay a visit to this road and await whatever chance might offer for effecting his object.

Having reached the road—if that could be called a road which was not more than a mule-path—he sat down upon a stone by the wayside and patiently waited.

Not many minutes passed ere a stout, simple-looking native made his appearance, evidently just from the mines as a heavy leathern pouch hanging from his belt indicated.

Our hero accosted him, and at once made known his business, which was no other than to effect a transfer of clothing.

The simple looking miner at first stared in bewilderment at such a proposal coming from one dressed in the picturesque but scanty garb of an Apache warrior.

The lieutenant soon made matters clear and the miner was finally persuaded into the belief that it would be a fine joke to appear among his cronies dressed *a la Apache* especially when supplemented by a handsome douceur of two shining gold eagles.

The transfer was made then and there, all except the leathern pouch which the miner was careful enough to retain.

"What town are you making for?" asked Moore, when he had finished dressing himself in the miner's clothes.

"Santa Clara."

The lieutenant gave a slight gesture of surprise.

That was the name of the place where Colonel Harrison had agreed to have ready on emergency a body of men, partly from the garrison at Fort B—, partly Mexican troops, who were to combine for making a decisive attack on Balboaz and his men.

Richard Moore reflected that it was now six days since he had crossed the boundary into Mexican territory, affording ample time for the colonel to be at the appointed place with the troops.

If this was so, he could not have a better opportunity than the present for sending a message to Colonel Harrison.

He tore a leaf from his note-book, and hastily wrote in pencil:

"Have trailed the game to his last cover. Be ready to move within two days at least. Hope to have good news by that time. Birdie Lester still a captive. Yours, R. M."

Folding the leaf carefully, he directed it and handed it to the miner.

"Take that," he said, "to the commander of the American troops in Santa Clara—Colonel Harrison. He will reward you for your trouble."

Then enjoining upon him strict secrecy, Richard Moore, in his rough miner's garb, turned once more toward his little retreat in the mountains.

He arrived shortly after nightfall. Sam, who was keeping guard, was nearly on the point of firing at one who seemed to him an intruder into their hiding-place. But the well-known voice of the lieutenant stopped him.

"Sam, you wouldn't shoot your own partner?"

"Jerusalem! it am you, sartin; but who'd 'a' known you in that rig?"

"Never mind the rig, Sam. Necessity is the mother of invention. My first disguise played out before I had fairly got used to it; but it served one good purpose."

"What war dat?"

"It enabled me to free our Indian friend, Montezuma, from a second horrible torture."

"What!" exclaimed Sam, "am de squares-red-skin dat eber breathed really free an' at libin'?"

"I know not whether he got clear away or not. I am certain, though, he is too keen-witted to fall alive into Balboaz's hands."

"An' what ob Miss Birdie—de purtiest gal in Texas?"

The lieutenant shook his head sadly.

"My stay was too short to do anything in that direction. I did not even get sight of her."

"When is yer goin' to commence work?"

"This very night."

"How?"

"We must first hunt for some other mode of access to the mountain fortress than the regular one."

"You will not try to enter openly then?"

"No. Balboaz has been warned of our presence. It would be folly to venture on another ruse like the first."

"Does yer think anudder entrance can be found?"

"It seems impossible. Yet it will be no harm to try."

It was now growing late, and amid the shadows of the cliffs intense darkness reigned. The two friends concluded it was time to break up their interview, and proceed to active work.

Being already thoroughly armed, they made no other preparation than to take a hasty bite of food, and a draught of water, sufficient to strengthen them for their perilous undertaking.

A rapid walk of half an hour through the rugged fastnesses of the mountain brought them to the small, meadow-like expanse, from which towered boldly up the twin cliffs with their flat summits on which was planted, seemingly unapproachable, the bandits' camp.

The two friends took a long look at the black, gigantic shapes rising up before them.

Could they surmount those perpendicular walls?

It seemed a hopeless task, yet with stout hearts they set about hunting for some yet undiscovered pathway.

They started directly at the base of the main mountain on the north, and skirted the foot of the projecting cliffs outward to the extremity.

Their progress at first was slow, from the many rocks and boulders scattered around.

Nothing but the perpendicular face of the rock greeted their anxious search for some rods.

Weeds and tangled vines covered portions of the cliff. But even had a venturesome climber committed himself to such a frail support, they would either have failed before he had reached half-way, or his physical powers would have utterly given out.

Thus they explored the foot of the first ledge completely, till they reached the base of the mountain directly opposite, where they had first started, their hopes waning as they proceeded.

Before them loomed the other cliff, more steep and forbidding than the first.

Now and then, sounding far up, came the cry of the sentinel as he tramp'd his beat, showing that Balboaz observed military precautions in his isolated camp.

The place where Richard Moore and his companions halted to rest was one peculiarly inviting from the soft turf that spread for some yards around, and which received nourishment from a continual misty shower that fell from some unknown point in the cliff above.

This falling shower had gradually worn itself a deep basin at the foot of the cliff, from which it ran off in a gurgling stream—a pleasant sound to the thirsty, toil-worn scouts.

"Well, Sam, we have a harder task than we thought," said the lieutenant, rising from his knees, after taking a drink of the cool, dark waters at his feet.

"Sartin—it am de hardest nut to crack I eber see'd."

"Would that our old friend, Montezuma, were here; he, if any man, could show us a way."

"Hist!" said Sam; "I heard de bushes rustlin' ober dere—shoah's yer' libin'."

Richard Moore looked in the direction indicated.

As he did so the tall form of a man became dimly discernible through the darkness.

"Hebens!" whispered Sam, "we'll be discovered."

The lieutenant grasped his knife and shrunk back into the dense shadows of the cliff.

He was anxious, yet determined. A discovery in their present situation could hardly be otherwise than fatal.

Still the tall, dark form approached with the same rhythmical step. He stepped across the narrow rivulet and paused within three feet of our friends. By reaching out they could have touched him.

But during his approach the two scouts had kept their gaze intently fixed upon him. First doubt, then wonderment possessed their minds, until, when they could no longer doubt the tall, slender form, the noble head, the erect bearing

of the person before them, they cried as with one voice:

"It is the Indian! It's Montezuma!"

Weapons were immediately replaced and a hearty greeting, which we will not attempt to describe, took place.

"And how did you escape?" at length asked the lieutenant.

"I leaped into the 'Bottomless Pool.'"

"The 'Bottomless Pool!' I do not understand."

"I outwitted the fools finely. Little do they imagine the mysteries amid which they have lived so many years."

"But your escape—I cannot understand it," persisted the lieutenant.

"The explanation would take up too much time at present," said Montezuma, "if you still persist in the object that brought you here."

"To find a way to the top of the cliff! Yes, I confess that is what we have been working for to night."

"It may be easier than you think. Follow me, and I may assist you in a way you have not dreamed."

The Indian turned with the words and, crossing the stream, stepped to the base of the cliff where it was washed by the descending shower of water.

Directly behind this dense, misty shower, the cliff was completely hid by a most luxuriant mass of vegetation descending into the waters of the shallow pool.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE BOSOM OF THE MOUNTAIN.

THE Indian, the two scouts being directly behind him, suddenly stooped and pulled aside, as if it were on hinges, a portion of the thick, matted growth.

"Enter," he said laconically.

Looking within, the two men beheld to their surprise a hollow space, which seemed to extend back into the cliff; but so dense was the darkness that they hesitated to obey the Indian's command.

"Enter," he repeated; "we shall strike a light as soon as we are all in and the entrance is closed against any intrusive gaze."

They entered without further parley, and were agreeably surprised by stepping upon what seemed solid rock.

Montezuma followed immediately, letting the dense curtain fall to behind him.

All three stood in intense darkness.

The Indian from some hidden crevice produced a pine fagot, the end covered with some dark, pitchy substance, which when lighted gave out a clear, luminous flame.

The light flashed around on a small semi-circular cavity. The wall and floor looked like hard, baked clay. The side by which they had entered appeared a living mass of green, the drops of water gleaming through like so many diamonds.

The two scouts gazed about them with wonderment.

"I see no way to get further," said Richard Moore.

"I will soon show you a way," said Montezuma, flashing the light upward against the ceiling, which was only a few inches above his head.

He pressed the torch against a certain point. With a slight creaking sound a small square section slid back, revealing an opening just large enough to admit the passage of a well-grown man.

The Indian first drew himself up into the unknown darkness above, after handing the torch to the lieutenant.

Next the lighted torch was handed through. Then, with the aid of Montezuma, the two friends also ascended through the narrow opening.

The trap-door, which was operated by a secret spring, was closed to beneath their feet.

Now they were inclosed on all sides by solid rock.

The traces left on the hard stone, now hemming them in, showed plainly that this strange passage was of artificial origin.

The small landing-place in which they stood was just large enough to give standing-room for the three men.

In front rose a flight of stone steps, between narrow walls and disappearing in the darkness above.

Montezuma started up the long flight, followed by Richard Moore and Sam, who contemplated the mysteries around them in awe and silence.

Up! up! up—they went, till their limbs began to totter under them, and the steep ascent seemed endless.

Now and then Moore fancied he saw the outline of a door in the blank stone wall, which possibly led to chambers and mysterious vaults, unopened since their ancient builders, the Aztecs, had deserted them.

At last the Indian came to a halt.

He had reached another small landing, the walls seemingly barring all further progress. Not a sign of a door appeared on the smooth face of the stone.

Montezuma seemed thoroughly skilled in all the exits and entrances of the wonderful labyrinth.

Pressing a certain point in the face of the wall part of the smoothly-chiseled stone swung noiselessly back.

"Tread softly," said the Indian, "we have now left the secret portion of these passages, and are in the corridor that leads to the chambers of Balboaz."

He took the precaution, first, to close the secret door behind him, and so nicely was it fitted in the stone wall that not the slightest trace remained of its existence.

In fact Balboaz himself had passed that door hundreds of times, without ever a hint entering his mind as to the mysterious passage that led to the very heart of his stronghold.

When the three friends left this passage they proceeded with great care, Montezuma still leading with the lighted torch, for they knew not how near the inhabited rooms might be.

They were soon enlightened on this point by hearing the sound of voices, which seemed to come from some chamber close at hand.

On hearing these sounds, which warned them that some at least of their enemies were yet awake, the three men stepped forward stealthily.

The Indian blew out his torch.

At the putting out of the torch, a small ray of light was seen coming through the key-hole of a door.

Montezuma now gave way to the lieutenant, as he was the one most nearly concerned in the rescue of Birdie Lester.

The latter stepped softly forward and kneeling down placed his ear to the key-hole.

The voices had ceased a moment but now recommenced. The principal speaker he recognized at once by his voice as no other than Balboaz. The other voice was that of a young woman—the fair captive, Birdie Lester.

The heart of the brave lieutenant thrilled with emotion as he thus realized how near he was to the beautiful girl for whom he would have given life itself.

Anger soon displaced all other feelings as he listened to the dialogue between the cruel Spaniard and his victim.

They had evidently been speaking for some time for Balboaz was saying in taunting words:

"So you think your handsome soldier will rescue you?"

"I not only think it, I know it, so long as life is his," was the brave reply.

"You are positive, *mia cara*. But you will be disappointed. You are as secure here as though you were in the bowels of the earth."

"What is your object in making a prisoner of me?"

"Hal hal can you ask that after all my devotion?"

"Is it money? If so, my father will give all he possesses for my return."

"Really, my dear, I fancied your intuitions much keener. Is it possible you do not conceive why I went to the trouble of bringing you all the way from Texas?"

Birdie Lester remained silent.

"Then I will tell you," said Balboaz passionately, "it was to make you my wife."

"Heaven preserve me from such a fate," moaned the girl.

The Spaniard laughed sardonically.

"Heaven is a poor defender. It has never yet seriously interfered with my purposes."

"It will now—if never before."

"We shall see. Meantime I have come to prepare you for a little ceremony which must take place this very night."

"What ceremony?" asked the girl in trembling tones.

Too well she feared what reply would fall from the bandit's lips.

"Our marriage. The priest is ready and only awaits my summons."

"Oh, have mercy, Balboaz! You cannot have the heart to force me into such a union!"

"Ha! am I so repulsive then?" said Balboaz, stung by her words. "Perhaps my person does not suit your dainty taste?"

The bandit, with true Spanish vanity, thought, by calling attention to his personal beauty, which was truly remarkable, to advance his suit.

He was disappointed if he expected any reply from the persecuted maiden.

"Very well," he said, "willing or unwilling you are mine. So prepare yourself while I go for the priest and witnesses."

With the words he advanced toward the door.

Meantime, our hero, who had heard every word of the above dialogue, had arranged a feasible plan with his companions.

They all three retreated and concealed themselves in the darkness of the corridor as the bandit chief left Birdie Lester's chamber.

Balboaz carefully locked the door behind him—but left the key in the door.

Had he taken it with him he would probably, before going far, have had to surrender it.

As it was he was allowed to go free.

"Now is our time," whispered the lieutenant,

as the bandit's footsteps died away in the distance.

The next moment he had turned the key and entered a luxuriously-furnished chamber.

There, kneeling on the soft carpet, he saw the form of Birdie Lester, her hands folded and eyes upraised in prayer. These words fell upon his ear as he entered:

"And send my brave Richard to rescue me from this horrible man." Like an echo came the reply from Richard himself:

"He is here, Birdie, and will save you or die in the attempt."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HIDDEN STAIRWAY.

BIRDIE LESTER sprang up at the sound of the deep, familiar voice. It almost sounded as if Heaven had heard her prayer and had sent the brave lieutenant in time to rescue her from the hateful power of the bandit chief.

She gave a slight scream of joy as she caught sight of Moore's tall form, and realized that it was no dream.

"Quick, Birdie!" whispered the lieutenant, while he seized one of her small hands in his warm clasp, "there is not a moment to lose, if we would be off before the villain's return."

Without a word, she allowed Richard Moore to lead her from the room, a joyful light gleaming in the blue eyes.

Sam and the Indian had been waiting outside during this little episode. When the lieutenant reappeared leading the fair girl, Montezuma closed and locked the door in his rear, just as Balboaz had left it, only he retained the key.

"What am I to do?" whispered Sam.

"To delay Balboaz. It will take him some little time to break in the door."

The party then hastened through the darkened corridor under the guidance of the Indian toward the secret door by which admittance had been gained to the inhabited chambers.

Montezuma did not dare to relight his torch while they were yet exposed to discovery in the open corridor.

He proceeded with as much certainty in the darkness as though surrounded by the full light of day.

He reaches the point where the door, worked by some secret mechanism, admits a passage through the blank wall.

He tries by feeling in the darkness to find the hidden spring, but fails.

"I cannot open it without a light," said Montezuma. "Have you a match?"

Moore happened to have a box of lucifers, one of which he soon transferred to the Indian.

"For God's sake, hurry!" he whispered, anxiously.

Montezuma answered not, but struck the match against the wall.

As the light flashed up his keen eye at once discovered the spot he had been seeking.

With magic quickness his hand darted to the spot and the stone wicket swung noiselessly inward.

At the same moment a quick step, accompanied by voices in earnest conversation sounded from the far end of the corridor.

Instantly the match went out, and Montezuma said in an intense whisper:

"In, for your lives, and step softly, if you would feel the open air this night."

There was no time for disputing about precedence. Moore realized the full peril of the situation to the fair girl at his side and lost no time in leading her through the opening.

Sam came next, and lastly the Indian, who closed the friendly door noiselessly behind him.

Fortunately this had been done without raising any alarm, and all drew a long breath of relief when they found themselves together and in safety.

Safe they were—for the time being—unless something unforeseen should occur to disclose to Balboaz the secret door. This was scarcely probable after remaining so many years undiscovered.

Meantime the little party heard sounds from the corridor without that required no need to explain them.

First Balboaz uttered a cry of astonishment on finding the key gone.

Then they heard him try the door and utter a series of maledictions in Spanish on discovering it still locked.

Some moments passed in silence, then came the loud sound of some heavy instrument crashing against the door.

"He will soon contrive an entrance," said Montezuma. "We had better descend."

All agreed to this, and Montezuma lighted the torch which he still held, preparatory to leading the party down the long, winding stairway.

We need not say that Richard Moore devoted himself to his companion Birdie; and, during the winding descent, interchanged accounts of the adventures that had befallen each since they had last met.

They had taken but a few steps downward, when a heavier crash than they had yet heard,

told them that Birdie's late apartment had been forced.

They hastened their steps, knowing that swift and earnest search would be made for the missing captive.

They reached the landing, through the floor of which another door would admit them to the little nook behind the waterfall, in much shorter time than it took them to ascend.

Montezuma was the first to set foot on the stone floor of the landing. He suddenly drew back as if stung and turned upon those following with a warning gesture.

"We are trapped at both ends," he whispered. "The room below is full of men."

We may imagine the consternation of the little party on hearing these words.

Birdie clung to the lieutenant's stout arm as if that alone would shield her from all harm.

"Return up the stairway a little higher," whispered Montezuma, "while I find out the meaning of this."

The three thus addressed retreated a little way up, while Montezuma cautiously laid himself flat upon the stone floor of the landing.

By applying his ear to a small crevice he could hear all that passed below.

He remained thus perhaps five minutes.

At the end of that time he slowly rose; and ascending rejoined his three companions.

"Well, what have you found out?" asked Moore, in an eager whisper.

"Much. We are in a bad fix."

"Those below are really bandits—our enemies?"

"Yes."

"How did they find the hidden nook?"

"The hidden nook below us is known to all the bandits, but not this passage that leads from it."

"Some one of the band was wandering about the valley about the time we went behind the screen of leaves. The light we struck within shone through and attracted his attention."

He gave the alarm; hence the presence of him and others below."

"But what do they intend to do? What are they waiting for?"

"They have sent a messenger to Balboaz and await his return. Finding the place empty, and no trace of a light, they were mystified, and are cursing the fellow for leading them on a fool's errand."

"They have sent to Balboaz!" repeated the lieutenant, anxiously. "That will be fatal, I fear. The cunning villain will guess at once from what direction rescue has come."

"As I said, we are in a tight place."

"But we must do something. Is there no other passage that will lead us out?"

"None that opens into the valley. But they will be some time in finding the secret entrance."

"But if we are penned up in here we will starve."

"Time enough to think of that. But I hear them talking loudly below. I suppose Balboaz has arrived. I must hear what he says."

Once more Montezuma ascended and resumed his listening position.

Hardly had he done so when a series of loud knocking commenced in the room below.

They were sounding the walls for some secret entrance.

The cunning leader of the bandits as Moore had hinted, went at once to the root of the matter.

He conjectured, though he was unable to account for such knowledge on the part of the two scouts, that they had reached the interior of his stronghold by some unknown path, and had thus, a second time spirited away his beautiful prize.

He had not reached this conclusion until after the man sent from the valley below had announced his seeing a light and hearing voices in the room behind the waterfall.

On receiving this information he at once surmised that through the hidden work the two scouts had reached his most private chamber.

His first words on entering the place was an order to sound the walls for some hidden door.

Of course they failed.

Balboaz swore a little, but did not give up.

"Try the ceiling! Down one of you on hands and knees. Pedro, your back is the broadest. Sam can stand upon it and sound overhead."

They did as directed; but as the one mounting the broad torso of the other, arose to an erect position, his head struck violently against the stone above. To the amazement of all that part of the ceiling slid noiselessly back.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRAPPED.

A LUCKY, or rather unlucky accident had disclosed what perhaps hours of diligent search would have failed to find.

Balboaz uttered a cry of triumph and stepping upon Pedro's back was the first to climb through the narrow opening.

Meantime how was it with Montezuma?

The sounding of the walls below warned him that their concealment was no longer safe.

Had he been alone he would have waited to see the final issue of their search.

But the lives of others depended on his pru-

dence. He must take no risks. When he heard Balboaz's order to try the ceiling his course was plain before him.

He at once arose from his dangerous position, and with swift but silent step returned to the three anxious friends.

Even then he did not imagine that the secret door would be discovered for an hour or so.

His astonishment was great therefore, to hear just as he rejoined the two scouts and the rescued girl, a shout of triumph behind him—so clear—he at once knew what had happened.

He uttered a fierce exclamation in his own tongue; then, turning to those now wholly dependent on him he whispered:

"Follow me, and instantly. They have found the entrance and will be on us in a moment."

He checked the words that rose to Moore's lips by a warning gesture, then sprang swiftly forward up the steep stairway.

Though not wholly understanding the situation of affairs, Richard Moore and Sam were too prudent to disregard the Indian's warning. Besides, the sound of some one climbing through the opening below came just then to emphasize his words.

The lieutenant whispered words of encouragement to Birdie Lester, while mounting the stairs after Montezuma. They followed the steep windings for some minutes, and were finally brought to a halt by the form of the Indian, who had stopped and stood motionless in the narrow, upward path.

"Enter," he said, pointing to a dark opening to their right.

They obeyed, for their trust in Montezuma was implicit.

All this time they had been in darkness, for the torch had been extinguished the instant the bandit had discovered the secret opening.

They entered the mysterious room in darkness, and the Indian followed, closing the entrance behind him as silently as he had opened it.

"You are safe," he whispered, "for the time at least, provided you make no noise to disclose your presence."

They had found this shelter in good time, for the noise of their pursuers' steps sounded loudly on the stone stairway.

Balboaz at their head, and waving a lighted torch, was carefully scrutinizing the walls on either side as he hastened up the steep ascent.

He arrives opposite the chamber in which stand the four fugitives, surrounded by darkness and peril.

The hearts of the latter almost stand still as the steps without cease for a moment just outside their chamber of refuge.

Sam and the lieutenant clutch their revolvers fiercely resolved that it shall be a fight to the death in case of discovery.

But the danger passes. The steps and rude voices go by, and the little party once more breathe freely.

"There is a smaller room back of this," said Montezuma. "Let us go there, and we can have a light without danger."

They all enter the chamber indicated, the Indian's footsteps serving as a guide in the dense gloom.

After the door was closed behind them, the Indian relighted his torch, and a flood of light illumined the narrow chamber.

Like all the rest of this strange labyrinth, the room seemed hewn by human hands out of the solid rock.

There were some flat, square shaped stones scattered about the apartment. These were used by the party for seats.

The torch was stuck in a niche of the stone wall.

"We should have a guard in the first room," said Moore, "to warn us of the enemies' approach."

Sam said he would perform this duty, and at once returned to the first apartment.

Moore and the Indian then talked over their situation.

"Might we not escape by the waterfall entrance?" was the first query from the lieutenant.

"Hardly! Balboaz has probably left a guard who will prevent any escape in that quarter."

"We might overcome them by making a strong dash with knife and pistol."

"We might; but it would be attended with great risk, and the almost certainty of recapture before we got clear away."

The Indian did not mention that Birdie Lester, their fair charge, would be a serious hindrance to carrying out any such programme.

The girl herself, who was seated on one of the stones close by, felt too well the veiled application of the remark.

"Go," she said, raising her hands appealingly—"go, and leave me to my fate. Without me you can easily escape. What am I that I should lead three brave men to lose their lives for me?"

"That will do, Birdie," said Richard Moore, placing his hand with mock authority on her lips. "You have said quite enough. Another such remark and I shall begin to think you prefer Balboaz's company to ours."

"Oh, no, no! I abhor him!"

"Then never hint again that we must run off and leave you to his mercy. That would be a pretty wind-up, indeed!"

"But—but—you will all be killed—and for me! And it will all be in vain."

"Not in vain, Birdie—provided we all die together. Like the old Roman, I say, 'How can a man die better than fighting for those he loves?' But you take too dark a view of the situation. We are not dead yet, nor do we expect to be—for some time, at least."

"How are we to escape, though? We might as well be in a dungeon, chained and guarded, as shut up thus in the bosom of the cliffs."

"There is a difference. Our dungeon is unknown to our enemies, and by watching our chances we may find some loop-hole of escape."

"We may do better yet than that," put in Montezuma. "One of us can slip out and bring a troop of soldiers to our release, while the others remain hidden."

"But," said the lieutenant, "if one of us can slip out why not all?"

"When I said one, I meant myself. I can find a way alone where it would be impossible for you to follow."

"What way?" asked Moore in wonderment.

"A way I have not time to describe, for if I hear rightly, the bandits are returning down the steps."

Montezuma was right, for Sam at this moment entered with the same announcement.

"Now, then, is my time," said the Indian. "While they are below us I can make my way out above."

"But," put in the lieutenant anxiously, "it will take you several days to go and return with the soldiers from Santa Clara. If only the colonel got my note!"

"What note?"

Moore explained his sending a note by the miner, in which he requested his commander to come to his aid in two days.

"Good!" said Montezuma. "If he got the note I shall probably find him all ready for starting."

"But what shall we do for food and water in the mean time?"

"I had entirely forgotten that,"—here the mysterious Indian approached a corner of the room where a small bronze hook projected. Giving this a sudden twist he pulled open a door, disclosing a small closet whose shelves were filled with different shaped vessels.

"Here," he said, "is food and water sufficient to last you weeks if need be. It is a secret store I have provided for myself. Now I must go; I have no time to lose."

A friendly clasp of the hand with each was his adieu. He left the lighted chamber and rapidly traversing the larger one without, let himself through the yet undiscovered door upon the narrow stairway.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MONTEZUMA ESCAPES.

THE Indian carefully surveyed the stairway above and below; or, rather, the dense darkness preventing this, he listened intently in either direction for any sign of his enemies.

Far below he could hear harsh voices discussing the matter in hand. Many did not scruple to assert that they were chasing ghosts, and that they might as well try to catch moonshine as persons who had the power of vanishing through stone walls.

Montezuma smiled to himself and the quaint words of the man suggested to him an idea.

From the freedom of language indulged in he guessed that Balboaz was not with them and hence must be somewhere above.

This did not cause him to hesitate even a moment in carrying out his mission.

His devotion to the man who had twice rescued him from a fearful torture was too great for him to falter in his service; were death ever so near.

With that noiseless step peculiar to the Indian, Montezuma ascended the narrow stairway.

It was not till he had accomplished almost the entire distance that he came upon signs of a living presence.

As he turned the last angle in the winding ascent a ray of light streamed down from the landing above.

From his stand-point he could see without danger of being seen.

Still his position was full of peril. Should any one of the band attempt to pass either up or down, his discovery was inevitable from the narrowness of the staircase.

On the landing above he distinguished three persons, Balboaz himself and two of his followers. The former of whom seemed to be searching diligently for the secret door, through which the two scouts had gained access to his prize.

Montezuma recognized in the two other Mexicans the men who had pursued him from the torture-chamber.

Balboaz had sent the rest of his men below, that there might be no possibility to the fugitives of escaping by the waterfall.

He himself remained with these two that he

might hunt out the other entrance to the hidden stairway.

He was still engaged in this search while one of the Mexicans held a lighted torch for him, when a startled cry, or rather shriek from the other Mexican caused both to turn their heads.

Right before them stood the tall, gaunt form of the Indian, clothed as in life, whom they supposed buried fathoms deep in the "Bottomless Pool."

He stood, motionless as a statue with one long arm outstretched and finger pointed at Balboaz.

The effect of this sudden apparition upon the guilty trio was astonishing.

The Mexican who had first given the alarm, sprung past the ghostly figure and darted, four steps at a time, down the steep stairway.

The other, dropping his torch with a wild cry of despair fell prostrate on the stone floor and hid his face in his hands.

Balboaz alone remained silent, staring in motionless horror at the supposed victim of his cruelty.

Meanwhile the torch in falling had become extinguished and total darkness fell upon the scene.

This even the hardened Balboaz was unable to bear. A few minutes, passed in darkness and with that awful presence, would have driven him insane.

He knew this himself and with wonderful nerve struck a match upon the stone wall and relighted the torch.

Then he turned resolved to question his ghostly visitant.

But the tall form of the Indian had vanished—faded away as completely as though it had been of mist or thin air.

The terrified Mexican still lay cowering upon the floor, howling at intervals "Mercy! mercy!"

"Get up, coward!" said Balboaz, roughly kicking him. "Do you not see the ghost has vanished?"

Not for a moment had he doubted that the strange apparition was really a ghost and not the *bona fide* Montezuma. For with his own eyes had he not seen him leap into the "Bottomless Pool?"

"Is it really gone?" exclaimed the Mexican in a weak voice, as he ventured slowly to raise himself from the floor.

"Have I not said so, idiot? Get up and let us look for this cursed door again."

Balboaz tried to put a bold face upon the matter, though his heart sunk within him as he pictured a second spectral visit from the dead Indian.

As for his subordinate he resolutely shook his head at Balboaz's suggestion; and turned to descend to his companions.

"Will you disobey me?" shouted the chief, now infuriated. "Return this instant or expect to be hung as a traitor to our mutual oaths."

"When I entered the band," said the Mexican in a calm voice, "I swore obedience to you and death to your enemies; but if by enemies you mean ghosts, as well as living persons, I must take it back and leave the band; for I never was good at putting a hole through nothing, either with knife or pistol."

The chief smiled at this remark, and the Mexican, taking courage, tried still further to soften his wrath.

"It pointed its long finger directly at you. If you value your safety, cap'n, leave this place at once. You have received fair warning. A warning from the spirit-world, if not heeded, will bring woe and disaster."

"How do you know what the warning was?" said Balboaz. "Did it speak?"

"No; but appearing just at this time and place showed plainly enough its meaning."

"I see you are incorrigible, Sancho. But I shall not give up for all that. I shall descend and see if there are any of the band not quite so great cowards as you."

"Your efforts will be vain, cap'n. If they have heard of the ghost, as I s'pose they have, a thousand pesos wouldn't induce them to come."

Sancho was right. When Balboaz descended to the room behind the waterfall he found the story of Montezuma's specter had already been industriously circulated by the Mexican who had run at first sight of the ghost.

There was no moving the men to further search in the mysterious passages. Their superstitious minds recoiled from the idea of spectral encounters in dark labyrinths.

The despotic leader of the bandits found that if he would prosecute the search further for Birdie Lester and her brave rescuers, he must do so alone.

Daring as he was, he was hardly prepared to do this in the face of both material and immaterial foes.

He did the next thing to this, which was to order a strong guard to be kept night and day in the little nook they were then in.

Also that a patrol should be maintained continually in the corridor opening upon the cliff above, and into which the two scouts must have penetrated to rescue the captured girl.

He had scarcely sent some of the men upon this last duty when one of the band who had

been acting as sentinel on the cliff above came running toward him.

By his frightened face and gesture Balboaz guessed that he must have something important to communicate.

"What is it?" he asked, as the man, an Indian, paused to recover breath.

The man responded in his guttural voice, first pointing to the ground, then making an upward gesture.

"Spirit of Aztec has risen. He walks the earth. He will not rest till he has vengeance."

"What spirit?" said Balboaz harshly, while his face grew pale. "Speak out, fellow, and don't keep us waiting."

"The spirit of Montezuma."

"When—where?"

"On the cliff above, not ten moments since."

"Where did it come from?"

"Out of the door that leads into the mountain."

"Then, what became of it?"

Balboaz bent forward in his eagerness to hear the answer.

"It walked as peacefully as though in the Spirit Land. It came to the edge of the 'Bottomless Pool,' here it threw up its hands with a wild shriek, and plunged into the dark waters."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IMPRISONED.

AN awed silence fell upon the group of Mexicans and half-breeds as the Indian gave in this ominous message.

Balboaz himself was no little impressed, though he took pains to conceal it.

This second appearance of the spectral figure, coinciding as it did with the first as seen by the two Mexicans and their leader, went far to convince the superstitious bandits that their impregnable abode was haunted, and would soon perhaps become tenantless to earthly beings.

Balboaz saw what fatal seed was being sown in the minds of his men, and that rapid disunion in the band would follow unless something were done, and that quickly, to check it.

He made a short, terse speech, declaring the whole thing a deception of the senses. That the Indian had conjured up the vision in his lonely vigil. That he himself had seen the same apparition; but, like a sensible man, ascribed it at once to a delusion brought on by long-continued excitement and wakefulness.

He then dismissed the men to their posts—a part to guard the waterfall entrance, while others should accompany him to keep watch in the corridor above.

The men separated, shaking their heads. Nevertheless, they obeyed their chief's orders with all their old alacrity.

Thus constant guard was kept at either end of the passage—the only avenue of escape to the three persons immured in the heart of the mountain.

Richard Moore, Birdie Lester, and the negro Sam, thus found themselves, as it were, close prisoners in the mysterious chambers hewn out centuries before by the Aztec.

One thing they wondered at, that they heard no further sign of their enemies passing up or down the stairway without. Why they had so suddenly abandoned the search was a mystery they were unable to solve.

Once only Richard Moore ventured outside of the two hidden rooms. Montezuma had taught him the secret of opening the secret doors.

He had traversed the stairway from top to bottom. At either end, by placing his ear to the stone wall or flooring, he had heard the steps and voices of armed men.

Then he knew that the crafty Balboaz was on his guard, and that escape without exterior aid, was impossible.

His greatest anxiety was concerning Montezuma—whether he had escaped, or been discovered, and put to death.

The suspense of waiting whole nights and days in those gloomy stone chambers, without a sign from the outer world, at times became almost unendurable.

Had it not been for the society of Birdie Lester, with whom our hero was becoming more intimate, he would not have endured it; but would have rushed forth, either to fight his way out by sheer force of valor, or fall a victim to his rashness.

As it was, the young people who were rapidly gliding into the mazes of "Love's Young Dream," found alleviation in each other's society, for the anxiety and suspense pressing upon their minds.

Sam, having no similar companion with whom to while away the hours, had the hardest lot to bear. His volatile spirits became morose and gloomy under the unaccustomed restraint. He who had been used to roaming the boundless prairies and forests in unrestrained freedom was now doomed to four narrow walls, shut out from the very light of day.

Two weeks of such confinement would have driven Sam insane.

In fact, he had already proposed, more than once, making his way out alone.

But to this the lieutenant would not agree.

All three watched the hours glide by, as best they could, till rescue should arrive in the shape of Montezuma with the soldiers.

Their last hope was anchored in the sagacity and courage of the Indian.

The arrangements provided for their comfort were few, but sufficient.

For bedding they had a plentiful supply of buffalo-ropes and other skins, which Montezuma pointed out before he left.

During the night Sam and the lieutenant slept in the outer room, effectually guarding their companion against any danger from without.

Birdie Lester was allowed sole possession of the smaller chamber, save when she chose to invite the two brave scouts to share her solitude.

The closet containing food and water which the Indian had so opportunely provided, proved to be a bonanza to the little party. Without it their prospects would have been indeed hopeless.

They had dried venison, corn-bread in flat cakes after the Indian fashion, wild honey, and water all stored in deep earthen jars, of curious patterns, specimens of that antique pottery still found among old Aztec ruins.

The little party limited themselves to a certain portion each day, not knowing to what extent their enforced stay might be prolonged.

Light they also had whenever needed, a few of the same chemically-prepared torches used by the Indian being found in one corner of the inner chamber.

These various articles being on hand so opportunely almost persuaded them that Montezuma had made special preparations for their visit. But as this was scarcely possible, they concluded that he was accustomed to spend part of his time, perhaps weeks therein.

The evening of the third day at last came round, and our friends had not yet received the slightest sign of help from the outer world.

The time had seemed interminable. Had it not been for the lieutenant's watch, which he kept wound, it would have seemed two weeks instead of only sixty hours.

They had just finished a frugal supper and all three fell to discussing the situation in a hopeless manner.

Sam was more downcast than either the lieutenant or Birdie Lester.

"It am my opinion," said he, breaking in on the general current of talk, "dat de Indian war only ankshus fur his own safety."

"Why, Sam," said Birdie, "how can you say that of one who has risked his very life to save us?"

"Sam," said the lieutenant, "if I didn't know that you are actually speaking against your own inward convictions, I would say you deserve a good thrashing."

"But it am a fact," persisted Sam; "why habn't we got word or sign from him since he went off?"

"It is hardly time, yet," replied Richard Moore. "Even if he succeeded in getting off, which I doubt much, it would take him a day to reach Santa Clara on a fleet horse, and fully two days to return with the soldiers."

Birdie Lester looked up joyfully.

"Then we may expect them to arrive and attack the stronghold some time to-night?" she asked, eagerly.

"I hope so; indeed I fully expect it, provided only Montezuma got off successfully."

These words roused the spirits of all three, and full of hope, they resolved to sit up into the small hours.

Sam and our hero got their weapons in readiness for instant fight when necessary.

The mere idea that rescue was to arrive that night so excited their minds that they gave no thought as to what they should do if they were disappointed.

Fortunately, they were not disappointed.

The minute-hand of Moore's gold chronometer pointed a quarter to twelve when a series of yells mingled with the clash of steel, came from below, and roused them like the peal of a tocsin.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A NIGHT ATTACK.

THOSE stirring sounds of strife infused new life into the veins of the two waiting men. Sam's depression vanished like magic; and in the excitement of the moment he gave a wild "hurrah" that echoed dangerously loud through the vaulted chambers.

"Sam, you will destroy all by your imprudence," said Moore.

"I swar to grashus, Mars' Moore, I couldn't help it."

They now quitted the limits of the two chambers and stood on the steep stairway.

The sounds of conflict below rose louder than ever for a moment, then as rapidly ceased.

The two men became intensely anxious as to the issue of the conflict.

Moore at length could control his curiosity no longer, and, followed by Sam, hastily descended the steps.

Ere they could reach the stone landing a

faint noise arrested their steps, and, as they bent forward, they saw the secret entrance in the stone flooring glide softly back.

The next instant the head of a man appeared through the opening.

Sam—almost gave vent to another cry of joy as well as amazement as he distinguished the straight black hair and bronze features of Montezuma.

The Indian, with an agile spring, came up through the opening and stood, tall and calmly erect before the two friends.

Moore ran forward with the eagerness of a school-boy to greet his faithful rescuer.

"Best of friends! you have kept your word and we shall owe our lives to you. The soldiers—how many have you?"

"Fully a hundred."

"Not all here?"

"Half are guarding the main entrance—the road hewn into the cliff. Fifty are in the room below securing their prisoners."

"You overcame the guard without any trouble?"

"Not the slightest. They take me for a ghost. My sudden appearance so frightened them that they had not the least thought of resistance."

By this time the soldiers began to come up through the narrow opening. This division had been assigned altogether to Montezuma's leadership, that they might take the bandits completely by surprise by coming upon them through the secret stairway.

The alarm had already been given to those on the cliffs above, and guns were fired and shouts exchanged in a manner that showed more bewilderment than real knowledge of the situation.

"Faster," said Montezuma to the men; "we must reach the private rooms of Balboaz before he has time to arrange too good a trap for us."

The soldiers came pouring up. In many Richard Moore was delighted to recognize his old comrades at Fort B—. A silent hand-clasp was his greeting, but his joyful glance expressed more than words. As for the men themselves, on once more seeing their favorites, Sam and the lieutenant, they would have sent up a shout to shake the very walls had not silence been a prime necessity in their present undertaking.

"What will you do with the prisoners below?" asked the lieutenant of Montezuma.

"They are well secured," was the answer. "Besides, I have left five well-armed men to guard them."

By this time some forty odd men had passed through the narrow aperture in the landing, and were crowded, Indian file, far up the staircase. Montezuma, the lieutenant and Sam were at their head.

The word was passed along in a whisper to advance, and with slow, measured step they commenced the long, winding ascent.

The Indian had not neglected to provide torches, which shed a strange, grotesque light over the long line of blue-coats.

When they reached the door which led into the two chambers that had served so long as a harbor of refuge, Richard Moore called a halt, for he could not pass on without acquainting Birdie with the fortunate change in their affairs.

He found her already standing just within the door, where she had been eagerly listening to the sounds of their approach.

"Birdie, we are saved!" was Moore's exclamation, as he caught sight of the fair face flushed with joy. "Montezuma has proved our good angel, and we are prepared to annihilate Balboaz and his men."

The revulsion from long suspense and terror was too great for the tender-hearted girl, and she burst into tears.

But like a refreshing spring shower they vanished as quickly as they came, and she looked up, her blue eyes shining through the pearly drops.

"What do I not owe to you and your noble friend! Heaven has indeed blest me with strong and brave hearts in my sorest need!"

"Montezuma deserves all your gratitude," said the lieutenant. "But for him our defense would have been indeed feeble."

"True," said Birdie, extending one small hand to the Indian; "his is the merit of action, yours of patient inaction when you might have escaped by deserting a helpless girl."

The Indian took the hand so graciously extended, and lifted it to his lips as if it were something precious. He spoke no word, but his dark eyes said plainly enough that heart and soul were devoted to the service of the fair girl before him.

"And now, Birdie," said the lieutenant, "we must hasten on, for our task is by no means finished but just begun. Remain yet an hour in these rooms until all danger is past. You may rely on my instant return when the bandits are conquered."

"But the suspense—the loneliness," began Birdie. "I cannot bear it."

Richard Moore interrupted her playfully. He told her that her presence among them would not only expose herself to danger, but that anx-

iety on her account would seriously interfere with his own and his friends' actions. The latter argument prevailed, and she was persuaded to cling yet a little to the rooms that had so long sheltered her.

After she had disappeared within and the stone wicket was securely closed behind her, the line of soldiers resumed the slow, winding ascent.

They reached the upper landing without further interruption—that is, a few of the foremost, including Montezuma and the two scouts, for the space was too narrow to hold them all.

Here the Indian bade those around him stand aside, while he opened the secret door that was to admit them into the corridor without.

He did this, suspecting that Balboaz had made preparations outside for giving a warm reception to any one making his appearance from that quarter.

He stationed himself on one side against the wall, then stretching forth his hand pressed the hidden spring.

The door flew open, and at the same instant almost a blinding flash and roar, followed by a storm of leaden hail, poured through the opening.

Owing to the Indian's precautions this sudden volley injured no one; and the bullets, flattening themselves against the stone vault, dropped harmlessly on the soldiers' heads, as they crouched on the staircase.

Then before the explosion had yet died away, Montezuma, Sam and the lieutenant dashed through the opening, followed by the rest of the men in order.

The space was too narrow to use their rifles, and dropping these the soldiers went to work with sword and pistol.

They had an easy victory.

After their first volley the bandits, who were only a small part of the band stationed there by Balboaz, instead of shrieks and cries from the wounded and slain saw tall, stalwart men come pouring through, headed by the gaunt form of Montezuma.

The appearance of the latter had more effect than the charge of the soldiers.

"The ghost! the ghost!" they cried, and dropping their carbines, fled pell-mell down the corridor.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DESPERATE LEAP.

As the bandits fled down the corridor the soldiers rushed after them in swift pursuit.

In the excitement of the struggle the three leaders, Montezuma, Sam and the lieutenant, ran at full speed, and were separated by some distance from those following.

This had brought them almost to the entrance that led to the open plateau without.

The three friends were busy dealing out havoc among the crowded mass of fugitives when a cry from Sam caused them to look behind.

Instead of the soldiers, whom they expected to see, the form of Balboaz appeared directly in their rear, at the head of a fresh party of bandits, who had rushed into the corridor from a side entrance, just in time to cut off Montezuma and the two scouts from their support.

It was a perilous moment for the three friends.

Sam gave himself up for lost.

The lieutenant said anxiously:

"We are surrounded—between two fires. How are we to rejoin our friends?"

Montezuma replied as calmly as though every moment was not fraught with peril.

"The men led by Balboaz are brave. Those before us are cowards and poltroons. We must cut our way through the latter to the plateau without."

He had scarce finished when the shrill voice of Balboaz was heard above the tumult:

"There it is, my men! Fire—and cease not until it is down! Now to test of what flesh his Ghostship is made."

He leveled a revolver straight at the Indian's head.

But Montezuma was quicker than he. Like a flash he seized one of the fleeing men, and whirled him around in time to receive the deadly missile.

Instead of the Indian Balboaz shot one of his own men.

"Quick!" now exclaimed Montezuma. "Gather all your strength. We must make a grand charge through all this rabble."

A scene of wildest confusion now reigned in that darkened corridor.

What torches the men had carried in the first place had been knocked down and trampled out. Only the faint rays of the moon lit up a small space in front of the entrance.

Amid this darkness the curious circumstance was presented of four distinct parties arrayed against each other, and struggling each for the victory.

Furthest to the rear, and in complete darkness, were the fifty odd soldiers, who had arranged themselves in a compact body, and were bravely trying to force a passage with the sword.

Against these Balboaz's party had opposed

themselves, taking them completely by surprise and cutting them off from their leaders.

As the Indian had hinted, these men were a fresh force, consisting entirely of Mexicans, who had just returned that evening from disposing of the large herd of stolen cattle. They had also brought the product of their spoil, in the shape of a large sum of money.

A portion of this Balboaz had distributed equally among the men. The rest he added to a secret hoard, which already amounted to an immense sum.

Incited by the money, as well as by a natural courage superior to that of the Indians and half-breeds, these men attacked the secret invaders of their stronghold with a ferocity that bade fair to make the struggle doubtful.

While the main body of this force kept the soldiers in check, Balboaz himself, detaching a half-dozen, turned his attention to the Indian.

He had seen the tall, familiar form in the moonlight, and the forms of his men fleeing terrified before it.

At once the conviction forced itself upon him that as long as that mysterious form stalked uninjured amid his foes, any effective defense on the part of the superstitious bandits was hopeless.

The fresh addition to his forces were as yet unacquainted with the strange story of Montezuma's death and subsequent reappearance.

Hence his shout and the firing of the pistol revealed to them for the first time that the Indian was the special object of Balboaz's vengeance.

It will be remembered that Richard Moore and Sam were still disguised—the one as a miner the other as a white man.

Hence Balboaz did not include them in his savage order, in obedience to which immediately after the report of their leader's pistol, they directed their guns in a concentrated aim at the form of Montezuma.

But at that moment, when probably the Indian's life was in greater jeopardy than it had ever been, himself, Sam, and the lieutenant made a grand rush right into the midst of the confused crowd struggling to get into the open air.

Those men probably thought a tornado had burst upon them.

The strength and activity of Montezuma were wonderful. With no weapon but a long knife of exquisite temper, his tireless arm darted here, there, and everywhere, warding off every blow aimed at himself, and dealing destruction on his enemies.

By his side ran the lieutenant holding his straight military sword before him, and woe to those who opposed themselves to its sharp point.

But Sam's mode of forcing a passage was the most novel if not the most graceful.

Pulling a stout, fur cap down upon his thick skull he lowered his head like a well-drilled buck, after first scanning the route before him.

Then clinching his fists and summoning all his immense strength, he darted right between Montezuma and the lieutenant, and charged full into the mass of bandits.

A cannon-ball could hardly have cleared a path with more precision or in quicker time.

The amazed banditti fell to the right and left like leaves before a strong wind. Wherever Sam's head struck there was howling and lamentation. On—over falling bodies, amid shrill yells and a very Babel of curses he went like a resistless avalanche.

In less than five seconds he had passed through the entrance and was out in the open air beyond the skirts of the sorely-used crowd of bandits.

On turning he gave a ringing shout. His two companions were right behind him.

Richard Moore and the Indian had stopped their own efforts in wonderment on seeing Sam rush in between them.

When they saw the marvelous success of his charge, laughing, they lost no time in following at his heels, and warding off many a blow aimed at Sam that might have seriously checked his progress.

So rapid had been their rush out of the corridor, that not until they were fairly outside and beyond their enemies did Balboaz give orders for pursuit.

"After them," he shouted in a voice thrilled with rage.

These words were addressed to the Indians and half-breeds, who were already exasperated by the manner in which the three men had dashed through them.

The words of their leader aroused them, and arranging themselves in some order, they dashed after the three men who were in plain view under the moonlight, fifty yards away.

Moore and Sam were puzzled even now how they should escape the howling band at their heels.

The Indian turned to them. All three were now running.

"Can you trust me?" he asked.

"A strange question," said the lieutenant, "after all you have done for us—"

"Dar's whar dis niggah am 'greed, ebery time," said Sam.

"Then," said Montezuma, impressively, "fol-

low me wherever I may go even if it is into the 'Bottomless Pool' itself. Your lives will be safe there. If we stay here we are doomed."

"But—" began the lieutenant aghast.

"There must be no delay," whispered the Indian. "Quick! your promise. The enemy are almost on us."

"Then I promise," said Richard Moore. "At the worst death one way is as good as another."

Sam gave in his promise, rather doubtfully.

By this time they had reached the pool and close behind them they heard the shouts of their pursuers. A rattling discharge of musketry brought the leaden hail about their ears. Above all the voice of the implacable Balboaz rose triumphant.

Death seemed to lie on either hand for the two scouts.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BOTTOMLESS POOL.

"WE have have them, my men. *Carambo*, let them escape now if they can."

It was Balboaz who shouted forth these words as he saw the three friends halt on the brink of the shadowed pool.

He and his men were only a rod away, and it behooved the three fugitives to act quickly.

"Now," tried Montezuma, poisoning himself for the leap, "remember your promise. Follow straight after me. Pause not an instant if you value life and fortune."

With the words he threw his arms above his head, and giving a loud yell of defiance, plunged like an experienced diver into the dark, forbidding waters.

Richard Moore, though possessing more than ordinary nerve, shuddered as he saw the Indian disappear beneath the calm surface.

But remembering his promise, he breathed a silent prayer for protection, and imitating the action of Montezuma, he also plunged into the deep basin, diving almost at the heels of the Indian.

"Whar Mars' Richard goes, dere I is, shoah," said Sam, and, without an instant's hesitation launched his bulky frame in the wake of his two companions.

The three friends had followed each other in such swift succession that to those pursuing the three acts seemed as one.

Balboaz, on seeing his prey escape him a third time in such mysterious fashion was beside himself with rage.

He had now reached the brink of the pool and stood in the same spot occupied a moment before by the three fugitives.

As he gazed down upon the calm, waveless surface of the mysterious pool, he could scarcely realize that three mortal forms had just plunged into its depths.

The mystery maddened him, and the men around were astonished to see him cast off his long Spanish cloak and lift his arms as if in turn to take the daring leap.

"Surely you will not follow them?" exclaimed one of the Mexicans.

"*Diablo!* but I will," was the fierce reply.

"Think you I am to be outwitted in my own stronghold by a cursed Indian?"

With the words he also plunged into the Bottomless Pool.

The men around shuddered and drew back as they heard the loud splash. Then they glanced once more into the water, and when no sign of their chief appeared on the surface they shook their heads solemnly.

"Mad—stark mad," said one.

"I say he was bewitched—enchanted, and we had better move away from here if we would not meet the same fate," said another.

All agreed to this, and hastened with all speed from the dreaded spot.

Meantime we must take our readers beneath the surface.

Imagine the Indian diving deep down beneath the dark waters, Richard Moore at his heels and immediately behind the latter, Sam.

Down, down they went, and the two latter were beginning to think they would never rise, when suddenly they seemed to pass directly under a dark wall of rock that terminated just over their heads.

Then they rose rapidly but strange to say in complete darkness.

At last Moore and Sam find themselves at the surface and each draws a long, deep breath after their exhausting dive.

But by such darkness are they surrounded that it is impossible for them to distinguish each other.

This embarrassment is put an end to by the Indian, for they hear a sound as of flint and steel struck together and immediately thereafter a broad ray of light from a torch disperses the darkness.

This welcome light discloses the form of Montezuma himself standing on a small, rocky ledge, and looking round the lieutenant finds that the water in which he still floats is a round clear pool like that on the other side of the stone partition only much smaller and roofed in from the outer world by a vaulted arch of stone.

"Climb out," said Montezuma, "the water is too cold for a longer bath than necessary."

The lieutenant began to realize the truth of this and lost no time in clambering up on the rocky ledge or shelf that served to bound the dark pool on that side. Sam also soon made his way to dry land, when he commenced shaking himself vigorously like a cat out of water.

"Beats all creation, this do!" was the exclamation as he gazed first at the little pool from which he had just emerged and then at the cavern-like apartment in which he found himself.

"Hist!" exclaimed Montezuma; "if I'm not mistaken, some one has followed us." He flashed the light upon the calm surface of the pool. "Ha! he comes," he cried, as at that moment the head of Balboaz appeared above the surface. "Welcome! son of the Evil One, the Sun God has called you to your fate."

Balboaz uttered a fierce shout of defiance and sprung out upon the ledge in front of the three men.

"Ha, Montezuma! I have trailed you to your lair at last. You are no ghost, but either you or I shall be one before we leave this place."

He drew his sword which he had not discarded in his venturesome plunge into the unknown. Advancing, he made a fierce lunge at Montezuma.

The latter skillfully avoided the stroke and was about to draw his long hunting-knife in self-defense, when Moore stepped in between.

"Try your skill at fence on me," he said, drawing his own sword. "The Indian has only his knife and is unequally matched."

"*Diablo!* and who may you be?" inquired Balboaz, gazing savagely at the intruder.

"You should know me well, having been twice your guest. I am Richard Moore in the service of the United States army."

Balboaz gazed in mute astonishment at the face before him.

"By all the saints—it is the American scout. The man who has clung to my heels like a sleuth-hound. Death! but I owe you much."

"You now have a fine opportunity to cancel the debt," said the lieutenant, smilingly fingering his sword-blade.

"*Diablo!* but I will, senor," and Balboaz put himself in position for a regular set-to.

"If you really intend a duel," said Montezuma, "let us step back a piece from the water."

The Indian still bore the lighted torch and as they advanced further into the mysterious cavern, Richard Moore had time to survey its natural appearance.

The floor they walked on was as level as a city pavement, in some places covered with a gravelly formation. It was about five yards wide, the vaulted roof springing to a height varying from fifteen to thirty feet. Along one side, skirting the vertical wall, ran a stream of water, an outlet of the pool, and which disappeared with a pleasant sound in the darkness. These walls, wherever smooth enough, were covered with panels of arabesque figures carved in the quaint, hieroglyphic style of Aztec art.

On the other side tall, gigantic forms loomed up at intervals on pedestals of granite. From these and other curious features, the lieutenant guessed that this had been used by the ancient Mexicans as a temple of worship. A mysterious awe pervaded the place, which affected all four, even to Sam and the bandit leader who preserved an unusual silence.

Some twenty yards had thus been traversed when the Indian halted at a point where the wall to the left, turning, formed an angle, leaving on the right an opening just wide enough for the stream to pass through.

In this angle, towered a statue, far surpassing the rest in magnitude. It was seated on a massive throne carved from the native rock. As the rays from the Indian's torch fell upon the broad features they shone like burnished gold. A crescent of silver rays surmounted the massive head, sending forth with each movement of the torch, beams of reflected light. The right arm was outstretched, holding a massive stone hammer.

Montezuma first prostrated himself in the act of worship, then rising, said:

"Here, beneath the eye of the Sun-God—decide your fates."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DUEL IN THE UNDERGROUND TEMPLE.

"HAVE done with your mummery," said Balboaz, contemptuously. "What care I for this image in stone?"

As he said the words he struck the statue rudely with the back of his sword.

Montezuma's eyes flashed with rage. He looked as though he expected the sacrilegious offender to be struck to the earth for his temerity.

However, he said no word but stationed the combatants so that Richard Moore should face the statue; while the bandit leader stood directly beneath the outstretched arm and the huge stone hammer.

Sam was commissioned to stand a little to one side and hold the lighted torch that its rays

might shine with equal advantage to either party.

Montezuma himself retired a little to the rear and awaited the issue with no small anxiety.

The duel commenced with a clever skirmish on either side. Both handled their weapons with masterly skill, and it was soon apparent that they were a perfect match at sword-play.

The Spaniard excelled in rapidity of motion. His sword flashed here, there, sideways and across till it gleamed like a meteor in the torch-light. Such marvelous play would have utterly bewildered a less experienced hand than Moore.

The lieutenant, however, was thoroughly "up" in the fine points of the science. The lightning-like passes of the Spaniard were met at every point with a coolness and skill that began to exasperate Balboaz.

He knew that he could not long keep up the rapid and exhausting play with which he began. In fact he had committed the frequent mistake of putting in all his strength at the start. He had no reserve force to fall back upon.

Moore so far had acted altogether on the defensive. He had never really intended that the bandit should fall by his hand. To wound or disable him so as to make him an easy prisoner was his utmost aim. Even this he would avoid if his object could be accomplished otherwise.

This moderation on the part of our hero only exasperated the Spaniard the more. He fancied the lieutenant was trying to wear him out that he might give the *coup-de-grace* with the less difficulty. He resolved to make his last and greatest effort, and after a series of lightning-like feints, made a furious lunge over the lieutenant's guard.

Richard Moore could only avoid the deadly lunge at his breast by stepping backward. As he did so, he ran his sword-blade along that of his adversary, till it clinked in the hilt. This was the opportunity he had long sought, and exerting all his force, he tried to disarm the Spaniard.

But Balboaz's grip was of iron. It proved stronger than the lieutenant's sword, for the latter broke half-way to the hilt under the immense strain.

Richard Moore stood, holding the useless fragment, and could scarcely realize that he was weaponless and at the mercy of Balboaz.

Then the treacherous nature of the Spaniard displayed itself in unvarnished colors. Uttering a loud laugh, he sprung forward, and the next instant would have run his sword through the lieutenant's body.

Springing forward, he came directly beneath the outstretched arm and the huge stone hammer of the giant statue.

Then occurred a catastrophe so sudden and astounding as to utterly confound the beholders.

A pistol-shot rung out and down came the stone hammer held by the outstretched arm of the statue, with irresistible force upon the head of Balboaz.

The Spaniard fell as if struck by a thunderbolt.

With the fall of the giant statue's arm, a part of the wall to the rear of the image sunk with a loud crash, seemingly into the rocky floor of the temple.

Toward the square opening thus revealed, Balboaz fell, his head striking just within the stone threshold.

Moore stared, first at the motionless body, then at the huge, mysterious figure in stone that looked straight forward with its great shining eyes.

He was in a state of bewilderment impossible to describe.

Still there was the giant arm clutching the stone hammer, now hanging motionless by the statue's side, instead of stretching out horizontally; and there before him lay the inanimate form of the Spaniard in the dark opening which possibly led to still more mysterious wonders.

Sam in his excitement had dropped the torch and the party would soon have been left in darkness had not Montezuma, running forward, hastily snatched it up.

The Indian alone manifested no astonishment at what to the two scouts seemed a miracle.

"What is the meaning of all this?" asked the lieutenant as Montezuma approached. "Is this Aladdin's cave or what?"

"You are just being initiated into the secrets of the Aztec priesthood," answered the Indian with a smile.

"But what caused the hammer to fall and strike Balboaz just as he came beneath it?"

"That is easily explained. You see that girdle surrounding the image of the Sun-God?"

The lieutenant nodded as he cast his eye on the girdle, confining the richly-carved tunic, the whole of which was studded with precious stones of every shape and color.

"Right in the center where the girdle appears to join," resumed the Indian, "you see a round, flat stone of emerald hue. Now it is slightly shattered."

"Ha! I begin to see," said Moore. "You

fired the pistol, and that was the point aimed at. A good shot."

"I fancy it was, since it destroyed our fierce enemy without even touching him. By striking that emerald with violence a spring is set free within the statue, which lets fall with great force both the strong arm of the Sun-God and the door to the treasure-chamber."

"The treasure-chamber!" exclaimed Moore.

"Yes—do you wish to see it? It is the long-buried treasure of the Aztec kings. You poor fool," pointing to Balboaz, "thought to wrest it from me with his fiendish tortures. He has reached the threshold to boundless wealth, but he has reached it only to die."

"And does that dismal-looking cell really contain the wealth you name?"

"I have said so, and Montezuma never lies."

Sam also pressed forward on hearing this astonishing revelation.

The Indian, advancing, let the light from his torch shine into the gloomy-looking chamber.

It was a small, square-shaped apartment, and filled almost to the ceiling with bars on bars of silver and gold. In one corner were piled up half a dozen stone chests. These, on examination, proved to be filled with antique vessels of curious and beautiful patterns—all wrought with marvelous skill from the precious metals.

The lieutenant learned from Montezuma that these vessels had been used by the ancient priests in their feasts and sacrifices to the Gods.

As for the two scouts, on beholding this enormous wealth laid out before them, they scarcely knew whether to believe they were in dreamland, or in an out-of-the-way cavern in the Sierra Madre mountains. One seemed about as credible as the other.

Sam became almost wild with excitement, and throwing up his cap, gave three loud hurrahs.

"What are you shouting at?" said Moore, smiling. "The treasure is not yours!"

"Who said it was?" said Sam indignantly.

"Fink I se cravin' arter de yeller dross? I se seen it! Dat's what I se shoutin' fur. I se seen wid my own eyes one hundred milliyuns ob gold an' silver. Ain't dat enuf to make any man shout?"

"Granted. But it's hardly a hundred millions, Sam," laughed the lieutenant.

But something else had drawn Sam's attention, for he suddenly bent down over the dead bandit's body and commenced searching his pockets.

"What's up now?" asked Moore.

"This," said Sam, pulling forth and holding up to view a brass button with a dent in the side. "I sed I war boun' to hab it, an' I se got it."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

VICTORY.

AFTER the first glow of surprise on beholding the long-hidden treasure, Richard Moore's thoughts turned to a more powerful magnet even than gold.

He remembered with a pang of anxious solicitude that all this time Birdie Lester was shut up alone and defenseless in the gloomy stone chamber.

How had she borne the dreary solitude, and the awful suspense of uncertainty as to the issue of the conflict going on over her head?

And that conflict—even he was ignorant whether or no his friends had conquered.

All other plans must be dismissed till he could satisfy himself on these points.

He made known his anxiety to the Indian, and his desire to return at once to release Birdie Lester and learn the fate of his friends.

"You need not be uneasy as to the latter," said Montezuma. "The bandits made no long struggle after their leader's disappearance."

"But still they will be anxious concerning us."

"Very likely. And as there is nothing to keep us here longer we may as well return. But before doing so we had better dispose of this," concluded the Indian, touching the dead body of Balboaz with his foot.

"How? Shall we bury it?"

"Yes—why not? And as the most appropriate tomb we might drop him into the 'Bottomless Pool.'"

"But," said Moore, "the other officers and men must first see the body as a proof that he is really dead."

"True! I had not thought of that. We will leave him at the feet of the Sun-God. Only we must draw forth the body a little that we may close the door to the treasure-chamber."

They did so. Montezuma then pressed with all his force on an oblong stone, connecting the back of the statue and the wall, and restored the door of the treasure-chamber, and the giant arm with its stone hammer, to their former position.

"I shall take care hereafter," said Moore jokingly, "how I venture beneath that deadly hammer."

"It is only deadly," said Montezuma, "to him who tries to enter the secret chamber in an irregular manner."

While Richard Moore and the Indian were

talking Sam had been examining the stream of water that ran along the opposite wall and the opening into which it had disappeared.

"Jes' come here," he said, as he bent down by the side of the stream. "If I hasn't lost my eyesight, hyar am de track ob a moccasin, shoah."

The other two hastened up at this remarkable announcement.

Montezuma cast one glance at the faint imprint, then a broad smile spread over his calm features.

"This is my own footprint. See," he said, planting his foot in the track, "it fits exactly."

Sam rose, looking decidedly sheepish.

"A fool for my pains, shoah. But, I say you mus' 'a' passed through dat a'r-hole when you stepped dere."

"I did. It was through that opening I made my way out when I escaped to bring the soldiers to your aid."

"How! does that lead to the valley below us?" asked Moore.

"It leads to a point in the face of the cliff where the stream, falling perpendicularly, forms the waterfall you saw last night. From that point, and there only, a dextrous climber can reach the foot of the cliff, aided by the thick growth of vines and bushes."

"Is it possible you descended there? Why it is right over the little nook where the guard was stationed."

"I knew that, and veered to one side considerably before touching ground."

"You have gone through more toil and peril than even I had guessed. How can we ever repay you?"

The words were spoken with true feeling. Montezuma, touched, replied:

"Nonsense! Have you not saved my life twice, and released me from horrible torture? My debt to you would cancel my poor services ten times over."

"Well, we will leave the subject. But how are we to get out of here—the same way we came?"

"No, there is one much more convenient—a secret passage which has not been used for centuries leads from this hall to the very rooms you have occupied for the last few days."

"Why not have used it before?"

"Because the fastenings are so arranged as only to admit of passage in one direction. Then, by not going the way of the pool, I could not have impressed the bandits with the idea that I was a ghost."

"That was a decided help to us," laughed the lieutenant. "So you played the trick purposely?"

"Yes. The conversation of the men on guard suggested the idea."

Silence now fell between the trio. Montezuma, conducting them about half-way back to the pool, opened another door, which was cleverly concealed behind one of the statues.

This opened into a dark passageway, which led them almost in a straight line for some rods.

Montezuma, who held the torch, came at last to a stop, when a closely-barred door checked their progress.

He flung back with some difficulty two huge, rusty stone bolts, which, unlike all the other doors they had seen, were not hidden.

He then tried to pull the door open.

The thick stone, through a century of disuse, was immovable.

The Indian applied all his immense strength, but could not budge it.

"Lemme help," said Sam, taking a strong grip on one of the projecting bolts.

Both men were uncommonly strong, and under their united efforts something must yield.

Something did yield, namely, the door, hurling both men backward, and with it came a thundering crash from the opposite side, as though a wagon-load of crockery had fallen on the stone floor.

"What in de name ob Jerusalem am dat?" cried Sam.

"We have struck the closet in which I had stored vessels of food and water," said the Indian.

"Am dat so? Tank Heben we has nearly emptied 'em. It would 'a' been a pity to 'a' wasted all dem good wittles."

Something else was heard which excited Moore more than the crash of pottery.

A woman's scream had echoed from the outer apartment after the tremendous racket made by the breaking crockery.

Richard Moore halted not for his companions, but kicking loose two of the shelves that had hidden the now open door, he dashed through the closet into the room beyond.

As his heavy boots echoed on the stone floor another scream sounded on his ears, which only hastened his steps.

He saw a light gleaming from the outer room. He was, perhaps, not two seconds in opening the door and clasping a woman's form—the form of Birdie Lester—to his heart.

"Oh, how you frightened me," whispered the agitated girl, who, in her joy at recognizing the lieutenant, lay unresisting on his bosom, "Is

it you at last? How in the world did you come from that direction?"

"By a secret passage, dear, of which this wonderful labyrinth is full. And now tell me—how have you spent the hours alone in this dungeon?" he said, as he led her to one of the square blocks of stone, on which they seated themselves.

"Do not ask me. It was an awful suspense. It seems whole days since you left me—and the firing and shouting overhead. More than once I would have rushed out, daring everything, had I not promised you to stay. But you have not told me—have you really conquered?"

"My brave heroine," answered Moore, "I can only say Balboaz is dead, and that the bandits will hardly make a strong fight without their leader."

Birdie looked up in astonishment.

"But the conflict is over," she cried; "the firing ceased some minutes since. Have you not been with them all the time?"

"No, Birdie; my fighting has been mostly underground."

"Underground?"

"Yes. I will explain all another time. Now we must really rejoin our friends. They will be uneasy concerning us."

Sam and the Indian had already joined them, and all four started to leave the apartment.

CHAPTER XL

CONCLUSION.

ON reaching the upper corridor after ascending the secret stairway, our three friends could scarcely realize that it was the same scene they had quitted a few hours before.

Not a bandit was visible, save the bodies of those slain, and of these the floor was being rapidly cleared by parties of soldiers.

These by their talk and gestures showed plainly on which side victory had declared herself.

Those who belonged to the garrison at Fort B—, ran up with eager shouts of welcome on seeing Richard Moore and Sam.

From these he soon learned that complete success had crowned the efforts of the soldiers. The party of bandits who had opposed the squad of fifty, coming by way of the secret staircase after Balboaz had left them, lost heart before the stubborn resistance of the men in blue, and after a few feeble efforts, gave way in complete disorder.

They fled through the passage in the mountain that led to the other cliff. Here, instead of aid from their comrades who had been left there, they found themselves called upon to repel a vigorous attempt to ascend the path in the side of the cliff, which was being made by the rest of the soldiers under the command of Colonel Harrison.

A combined attack in front and rear was too much for the banditti. Under a desperate leader like Balboaz, they might have fought to the last extremity. But the mysterious absence of their chief dampened their spirits completely.

Colonel Harrison succeeded in forcing his way to the top of the cliff, and capturing the cannon placed there for sweeping the narrow path.

Then the survivors of the once terrible band threw away their arms and cried for quarter. They were rapidly secured, the arms gathered, and the prisoners shut up in two of the storm chambers.

This the lieutenant learned from the men, and his joy was great on seeing his perilous mission so successfully accomplished.

He was now eager to meet his superior in command, and, with Birdie Lester on his arm, he hastened out upon the open summit of the cliff, followed by Sam and the Indian.

What was his surprise to find there not only the colonel, but major Lester. At sight of her father, Birdie Lester uttered a cry of joy and rushed into his arms.

"Birdie!"

"Father!"

We will not linger over that meeting.

It was no discredit to the lieutenant or to those around that they should turn aside from the scene with moist eyes.

The major had fully recovered from the hurts received while defending his home from the savage assault of the raiders.

As he held his daughter before him, while he gazed joyfully into the beautiful features, he said, turning to Richard Moore:

"And it is to you I owe this happiness?"

"Not more so," answered he, pointing to Sam and the Indian, "than to those two brave comrades who have shared with me every peril."

"Heaven will reward you all three, for I cannot. Nevertheless, if Richard Lester can ever be of use to you, call upon him without fear; for life itself is a small offering for the joy of this moment," and he kissed the white forehead of his daughter almost reverently.

Moore had next to undergo the ordeal of the colonel's praises and congratulations.

He turned these off as skillfully as he could, and to the innumerable questions gave a fairly succinct account of his many adventures on Mexican ground.

Two days were spent by the soldiers and their commanders in the conquered stronghold.

This time was taken up in burying the dead, securing mules and horses for carrying away the plunder which had accumulated through many years of spoliation, and, lastly, in making preparations for removing the vast treasure of Montezuma, which had rested so long in the mysterious underground vault.

Montezuma had hinted his intention of presenting a large part of his treasure to the lieutenant.

The latter would not listen to any such suggestion.

He argued that he had not the slightest claim upon the treasure of the Mexican kings, and he could not persuade himself to accept even a portion of it as a bonus.

The Indian did not press the point but took another plan for effecting his object.

At the end of the two days, the whole party of soldiers escorting the captured bandits left the mountain stronghold.

A long string of mules conveyed the baggage and plunder of every sort.

To add to the triumph of the soldiers the hoarded riches of Balboaz himself had been found, cleverly hidden, in his bedchamber. A portion of this was distributed among the soldiers, Mexican and American. The greater part, however, was afterward divided out among the stockmen and herders who had lost most heavily by recent forays.

The body of Balboaz was first examined by Colonel Harrison and the Mexican commander; and, when fully identified was committed to the deep waters of the Bottomless Pool—a fitting grave.

The treasure-chamber in the underground temple was opened and closed for the last time in removing the vast store of silver, and gold, and sacred vessels. The Indian bade a last farewell to the gods of his ancestors, and not without a silent tear turned to join his fortunes thenceforth with his friend and preserver Richard Moore.

This treasure was also packed on the backs of the mules, as no other conveyance would serve through the rough mountain ways.

As they had nothing further to apprehend from robbers, they proceeded without fear.

Three days' steady march brought the little party of Americans to the Rio Grande. The Mexican division had parted from them after clearing the mountains, taking the prisoners in charge till they should reach Chihuahua, where they would receive their proper deserts.

We will not attempt to describe the scene that attended Birdie Lester's restoration to her home. The mother sobbed and laughed by turns. While the little bevy of sisters and younger brothers crowded around as if they could not see enough of the restored one.

Richard Moore came in for a full share of the thanks and general rejoicing. He, Sam, and Montezuma spent a full week with the hospitable family, during which the lieutenant failed not to press his suit with the fair girl he had aided in rescuing.

We need not say the suit prospered, and that the signs of a wedding in the near future were propitious.

One year later.

Sailing along the Gulf coast of Southwestern Texas, one of the most fertile spots on the continent, and in the best of climates, one sees among the low, verandaed plantation-houses scattered here and there, one larger and more pretentious than most of its kind embosomed in a grove of magnolia, orange and pecan trees. A broad veranda runs the whole length of each side—inviting from its coolness. A broad, well-kept lawn beautifully adorned with trees and shrubs slopes down to a bright, sandy beach. To the rear are orchards of fig, lemon, orange, peach and other tropical fruits, besides vineyards of blushing red, or white grapes. Fields of cotton and tall cane finish the view in the distance.

This is the home of Richard Moore and wife, once Birdie Lester.

The plantation is the gift of Montezuma, who cleverly outwitted the lieutenant's scruples by deeding it in fee simple to his wife.

Even then the young scout would only occupy it on condition that the wonderful Indian should make his home with them as long as he lived.

The condition was accepted.

Sam is also a member of this fortunate household in the post of general overseer.

Montezuma, with the aid of his more experienced friend invested his vast fortune in good, stable securities. A prominent museum in New York purchased the curious antique vessels—almost a fortune in themselves.

Thus we leave our friend Richard Moore, safely harbored for life in his delightful home, surrounded by friends—no speck to mar his happiness or shadow his supreme content; yet often in the midst of his joy he recalls with almost a shudder the perils and thrilling escapes encountered while hunting down Balboaz the Bandit.

THE END.

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